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## The race to catch Red Bull and perhaps Aston Martin

It's easy to be clever in hindsight, but it's not hard to believe that Lewis Hamilton really did have his doubts about the 2023 Formula 1 season from the moment he first saw the new Mercedes W14.

Following your own design concept is commendable – and can be beneficial as well as providing some variety on the grid. But it is already clear that Mercedes should have changed its design path last year or over the winter, rather than find itself with a lot of work to do in the middle of a record-breakingly long F1 season.

Alex Kalinauckas investigates the situation at Mercedes and what it is planning to do to recover in our big feature on page 18. He also takes a look at the state of Ferrari heading into this weekend's Australian Grand Prix at Albert Park, a venue that has been pretty kind to the red cars in recent years (p13). Will either of those big teams get anywhere near Max Verstappen — or Fernando Alonso's Aston?

Formula E's first visit to Brazil proved far less predictable. Stefan Mackley was in Sao Paulo to see Jaguar's Mitch Evans win a dramatic race, while Porsche driver Pascal Wehrlein managed a fine comeback to extend his points lead as the season approaches half-distance (p<sub>3</sub>6).

Elsewhere in this issue, we talk to one of the key architects of the British Touring Car Championship's success (p26) and perhaps the busiest professional racing driver in the world in 2023 (p32).





**Australian GP action** Full Formula 1 report from Melbourne, plus British GT and GB3 previews

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#### Cover image

Steve Etherington/Motorsport Images

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# Key removed as McLaren tries to

#### **FORMULA 1**

McLaren has locked in a radically revised Formula 1 technical team and discarded James Key as it seeks to reverse its groundeffects derailment. The team bottomed out with ninth in 2017 but had been largely on the right tracks since then courtesy of its subsequent Zak Brown-led recovery plan. That began with divorcing powertrain partner Honda, eventually in favour of a customer Mercedes deal, before recruiting former Porsche LMP1 boss Andreas Seidl and promoting Lando Norris into a race seat.

As a result, McLaren chalked third place in 2020 and, the following season, Daniel Ricciardo headed a 1-2 finish at the Italian Grand Prix to end a win drought dating back to the 2012 Brazilian GP.

But the heritage squad fluffed the start of the new rules era by constructing an MCL36 that suffered from wildly inconsistent midcorner balance. Talisman Norris required a third of the term to adapt comfortably. Ricciardo never did and was ultimately given the boot a year ahead of his contract expiry as McLaren slipped behind unreliable Alpine to fifth in the championship.

During that decline, the team had been reluctant to hit the panic button while it awaited the completion of major infrastructure upgrades. McLaren chiefs said publicly that they needed to play something of a waiting game until the new wind tunnel and simulator were ready to improve fortunes in time for 2024. Then the troubled birth of the current car made it plain that the problems ran deeper. The launch-spec MCL60, numbered to celebrate the squad's diamond anniversary, only took a small step forward over its predecessor and suffers from the same bad handling

habits. After the opening rounds in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, McLaren sits bottom of the table without a point.

All told, executive technical director Key has been given the heave-ho and a new three-way management structure devised. Most notably, David Sanchez has been tempted back to Woking after leaving for Ferrari in 2012. He will head up car concept and performance. It means that the French engineer will reunite with former Ferrari colleague Andrea Stella, who has been elevated to McLaren team principal since the winter departure of new Sauber CEO Seidl. But given Sanchez only resigned from Ferrari earlier this month, he is on gardening leave until 1 January 2024.

It is understood that this appointment and the further changes follow Stella working with Brown to complete a deep evaluation of the underperforming set-up, which ultimately laid sufficient blame with former Toro Rosso tech chief Key, who joined the team in March 2019 to a mixed reception from commentators. The internal review also concluded that some of the best talent already on the books was not being fully utilised.

Brown, who made it plain in every interview that no stone was being left unturned, didn't mention Key in his statement that accompanied the restructure. The American said: "It's important now that we ensure we have a solid foundation as the next phase of our journey. It has been clear to me for some time that our technical





## unlock form

development has not moved at a quick enough pace to match our ambition of returning to the front of the grid.

"I'm pleased that, having completed a full review with Andrea, we are now able to implement the restructure required to set the wheels in motion to turn this around. These strategic changes ensure the long-term success of the team and are necessary to see McLaren get back to winning ways. We have everything coming into place now with our people and infrastructure and alongside an exciting driver line-up, I'm determined to see McLaren get back to where we should be."

Working alongside Sanchez, and to remedy the problem of square pegs being deployed in round holes, ex-Red Bull head of aerodynamics Peter Prodromou has been promoted to a similar position at McLaren. The team's former chief engineer will be supported by Giuseppe Pesce. Senior Aston Martin aerodynamicist Mariano Alperin has also been recruited.

Meanwhile, Neil Houldey — a team employee since 2006 — has been bumped up to the newly created role of engineering and design technical director. And with Stella coming from an engineering background, Piers Thynne has been made chief operating officer. He will support the boss by leading the factory while the race team is at each event. Autosport understands that, in total, 15 individuals make up the overhaul at McLaren.

**MATT KEW** 

# Smaller teams pushing for F1 cost-cap concessions

#### **FORMULA 1**

Formula 1 chiefs are weighing up changes to the cost cap to help smaller teams mitigate infrastructure deficiencies to create a more competitive field.

The 2021 introduction of spending limits has been well-received and reduced the performance spread between the best and worst teams, but there is some discontent that the running order is now more fixed within that smaller window. Despite the rules reset for 2022, only in time for this season has a midfield squad, in the form of Aston Martin, taken a significant stride forward in catching Red Bull, Mercedes and Ferrari, the biggest spenders of the past decade.

One point of contention with the budget cap is that teams are strictly limited on capital expenditure, so there is little freedom to improve infrastructure back at base. While teams can build new factories, and a specific exemption has been allowed in the cost cap for new wind tunnels, other investment needed to improve equipment has to be included in the generic limit. This means that teams that had the best facilities already at the start of the cap have a locked-in advantage. Those whose cash injections fell behind face the prospect of needing to divert money away from car performance to improve their tools.

It has emerged, however, that preliminary discussions have taken place regarding teams being given greater freedoms with capital expenditure, so they can improve factory facilities. The matter was



discussed at the most recent F1 Commission meeting in February.

Williams team boss James Vowles is particularly keen for the tweaks. Rivals from both ends of the grid have offered their initial support, while the FIA and FOM are receptive of the prospect. A more detailed analysis of potential changes to the capital expenditure allowance is being prepared for further discussions in the next few weeks.

Vowles said: "I personally think if we want a meritocracy, we need the ability for my team to be given the chance to catch up with some of the big teams and have the same resources."

Alpine team principal Otmar Szafnauer elaborated: "What a cost cap does is it solidifies some inherent inequities... Things like brake dynos and full car dynos, that the big teams have and a small team doesn't, if you don't allow that expenditure, then that inequity is there forever. That means you're screwed forever. I think that's wrong."

**JONATHAN NOBLE** 





## Rivals divided on safety car Le Mans 'Americanisation'

#### **LE MANS 24 HOURS**

The new safety car rules put in place for this year's Le Mans 24 Hours have polarised the World Endurance Championship paddock. Toyota has come out against the move, while Porsche is among those in favour.

There will no longer be three safety cars out on track over the 8.47-mile length of the Circuit de la Sarthe when the race goes green after a caution. Instead there will be a single course vehicle behind which the field is massed, with the cars lined up in class groups and Hypercar at the front.

"Not very positive" is Toyota Gazoo Racing Europe technical director Pascal Vasselon's take on the change. He described it as a "kind of Americanisation of the race".

"A safety car always has a sporting impact, and then you can minimise that impact with the three safety cars or maximise it, which is what has been done for this year with one safety car," he explained. "The procedure that was in place was probably the best possible one to have the lowest sporting impact on a track of 13.6km with a lap time of 3m3os.

"The nature of the race could now completely change with a safety car. All you have to do is stay within three minutes of the leader and wait for a safety car. It makes Le Mans a bit of a lottery, and that changes the value of the win. It could devalue a Le Mans victory because you can get it by chance somehow."

Porsche Penske Motorsport boss Jonathan Diuguid (right) said: "More cars on the lead lap at the end of a 24-hour race is more exciting than not. After Le Mans last year with our LMP2 programme we looked at how the caution periods affected us and at the end there, one worked for us and one worked in favour of the [class-winning] Jota car. Trying to eliminate that as much as possible has to be good."

The race will be neutralised behind three safety cars as in the past, before a merging of the queue behind a single course vehicle. Any car ahead of the leader of its class in the queue will then get a wavearound. This will be followed by what has been termed the 'dropback', which will form the cars into class packs with Hypercar at the front and GTE Am at the rear.

The system was practised on the opening day of the WEC Prologue test at Sebring earlier this month. A time of 20 minutes has been estimated for the procedure to be completed at Le Mans. GARY WATKINS

P17 OPINION



# F1 chief floats idea to scrap FP

#### **FORMULA 1**

Formula 1 CEO Stefano Domenicali has declared his support for getting rid of free practice sessions during grand prix weekends. As part of his visit to Portimao for the opening round of the MotoGP campaign last weekend, the Italian was interviewed by Portuguese channel SportTV, and declared: "I am a supporter of the cancellation of free practice sessions, which are of great use to the engineers but that the public doesn't like."

Considering F1 owner Liberty Media has already been keen to experiment with the format, most notably introducing sprint races for 2021, Domenicali's comments have heightened speculation that bigger changes are afoot. Plus, there are ongoing discussions within the F1 Commission regarding revisions to the weekend structure to improve the spectacle.

The case in favour of ditching some non-qualifying practice sessions – introduced in 1976 on Saturday mornings to cut qualifying from four periods to three – is that three hours of non-competitive running during a GP weekend offers too much data to teams. That means more refined set-ups and fewer excitementinducing mistakes. The broadly positive feedback from sprint race events, which shift qualifying to Friday at the expense of a traditional FP2 slot, has fuelled the debate. The argument against binning off the running, a stance backed by teams and the more hardcore fanbase, is that testing is already extremely limited and a fuller timetable encourages greater attendance.

Domenicali has spoken before of awarding points to those who top practice sessions, or ditching FP3 on a Saturday in favour of reversed-grid races that could boost overtaking. But that runs the risk of champions being crowned in deeply underwhelming circumstances.

JONATHAN NOBLE





NASCAR Jenson Button made a highly respectable NASCAR debut in last weekend's Cup Series round at Austin's US Grand Prix venue. The 2009 Formula 1 world champion qualified a Rick Ware Racing Ford Mustang 24th out of the 39-car field and finished 18th. Fellow ex-F1 king Kimi Raikkonen earned bragging rights in qualifying; the Finn, who has NASCAR experience, outpaced Button by 0.033 seconds in a Trackhouse Racing Chevrolet. Raikkonen ran fourth at a late restart after others pitted, but lost ground, spun and short-cutted the esses, the penalty dropping him from 27th to 29th. Button's result came despite pitting twice for water and ice bags to stay conscious. "The first stint was really bad – it was embarrassing for me," he said. "It felt wrong, I was driving in a race where nothing's natural. I took a while to learn the racecraft. And I hadn't raced for three years, and I've never hit a car... intentionally." **Photos by Kinrade/NKP/Motorsport Images** 

## Rast and Taylor team up in Tower LMP2 squad

#### **LE MANS 24 HOURS**

Canadian entrant Tower
Motorsports will have two
factory drivers on its squad for
its Le Mans 24 Hours LMP2
assault in conjunction with the
French TDS Racing team. BMW
newcomer Rene Rast and Acuracontracted Ricky Taylor will join
Tower boss John Farano for the
World Endurance Championship
double-points round in June.

Farano, 63, will be making his second Le Mans start and first as an entrant after landing an automatic Le Mans entry for winning the LMP2 class in last year's IMSA SportsCar series (right). Because he is Bronze-

rated, the Tower Motorsports with TDS Racing ORECA-Gibson o7 will be entered in the P2 Pro-Am sub-class.

Rast is returning to Le Mans for his fifth start in the French enduro in what is his only confirmed prototype start of the season so far as he prepares for a likely berth in WRT's Hypercar squad next year, when BMW expands it LMDh assault with the M Hybrid V8 into the WEC.

Two-time IMSA champion Taylor is set for his ninth Le Mans and his seventh in LMP2. Farano said that he is "absolutely thrilled to be joined by Ricky Taylor and Rene Rast".

**GARY WATKINS** 







#### **MOTOGP**

Eight-time grand prix motorcycle world champion Marc Marquez has been ruled out of this weekend's Argentinian GP after adding himself to the growing pile of riders injured at the opening round in Portugal.

Last weekend's event at the Algarve circuit featured four riders suffering injuries that have forced them onto the sidelines. Honda star Marquez fractured his right hand in a controversial smash on the third lap of the main grand prix when he locked up under braking for Turn 3 and clattered into the RNF Aprilia of Miguel Oliveira.

The incident took both out on the spot, while the Pramac Ducati of Jorge Martin was

forced off track and dropped down the order after taking a hit from Marquez. Martin claims that has left him with a broken toe.

Oliveira suffered bruising, but further testing on Monday revealed injuries that will keep him off the grid in Argentina. Marquez required surgery on the fracture to his hand and was served a double long-lap penalty by the stewards for the incident. As we went to press, news came through that he will serve this on his expected return at Austin.

Marquez fully accepted the penalty on Sunday evening in Portugal, although a number of riders felt the punishment was lenient, with Aprilia's Aleix Espargaro believing he should have received a race ban.

Also ruled out of Argentina after a

collision was Ducati's Enea Bastianini, whose shoulder was fractured when he was taken out of the inaugural sprint race by VR46 Ducati rider Luca Marini.

Tech3 KTM rider Pol Espargaro will be out of action indefinitely after suffering a violent incident in second practice. The Spaniard was flung from his GasGas-branded bike at Turn 10 and smacked into the tyre barrier, which was not fronted by a protective air fence, much to the anger of the riders. After being airlifted to hospital, Espargaro was diagnosed with a fracture to his jaw and his back as well as bruising to his lungs. He is expected to make a full recovery and has gone home to Barcelona for more checks.

LEWIS DUNCAN

## **Brazilian court fines Piquet for remarks**



#### **FORMULA 1**

Three-time Formula 1 world champion Nelson Piquet has been fined the equivalent of £780,000 by a Brazilian court for using racist and homophobic language against seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton.

In an interview on a Brazilian podcast in November 2021, Piquet slurred Hamilton while discussing the Mercedes star's British Grand Prix clash with Max Verstappen. Piquet apologised for his remarks when they surfaced last June, stating that his language "was ill thought out, and I make no defence for it". He also claimed he was mistranslated since the derogatory term he used "is one that has widely and historically been used colloquially in Brazilian Portuguese as a synonym for 'guy' or 'person' and was never intended to offend".

But four human rights groups, including Brazil's National LGBT+ Alliance, took the matter to court, suing Piquet for 10million Brazilian reals for moral damages. The civil court in Brazilian capital Brasilia ordered Piquet to pay 5million reals. He can appeal.

The judge stated that the fine represents not only "the reparatory function of civil responsibility, but also (and perhaps mainly) the punitive function, precisely so that as a society we can one day get rid of the pernicious acts [of] racism and homophobia".

**FILIP CLEEREN** 



GT3 Ford's new-for-2024 Mustang GT3 racer has hit the track. The American manufacturer's first full-factory racer for the category undertook three days of testing at Sebring last week. The seventh-generation Mustang, which is powered by a Ford Coyote V8 developed by M-Sport in the UK, was taken to the Florida venue after a short shakedown in North Carolina near the Multimatic Motorsports facility where the car has been developed. No details of the test have been released, but it is understood that Joey Hand – official test driver for the programme – and Multimatic-contracted Harry Tincknell were among the drivers. **Photo by Ford Performance** 

# WRX to Hong Kong for finale

#### **WORLD RALLYCROSS**

The World Rallycross Championship is to stage its first city-centre event for its season finale in 2023 — in Hong Kong.

The bulk of the series is in rallycross's European heartland, beginning in June in Portugal before summer visits to Norway, Sweden, the UK (Lydden Hill on 22-23 July), Belgium and Germany. The penultimate round in October in South Africa then leaves a five-week gap before November's maiden visit of the WRX to the Asia-Pacific region.

The event, the first of a three-year agreement, will be organised by the Hong Kong Automobile Association with support from the Cultural, Sport and Tourism Bureau of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. It will take place in Hong Kong's Central Harbourfront Event Space, next to the Victoria Harbour.

Rallycross Promoter chief Arne Dirks



said at the launch: "Just being here today, it is clear to see what a spectacular location we are in, and what a magnificent backdrop Victoria Harbour and the central business district will provide for our high-stakes season finale and first-ever city race."

What effect the 11-12 November date has on attendance remains to be seen. It clashes with the first stages of the nearby and hugely popular Macau Grand Prix, which is expanding to two weekends in 2023 for its 70th running, as it did in 2013 for its 60th.

#### INDYCAR TEAMS TEST TO PREPARE FOR HYBRID

#### **INDYCAR**

IndyCar power suppliers Chevrolet and Honda have taken another step towards integrating the new-for-2024 hybrid unit with the 2.2-litre twin-turbo engines, with a two-day test on the Indianapolis road course.

Despite the track being viewable from the parking lot of the circuit museum, the test was veiled in secrecy. Scott Dixon of Chip Ganassi Racing and Will Power of Team Penske pounded around for Honda and Chevrolet respectively. Autosport learned that the test was to prove all parts — other than the MGU — for the hybrid system, including the supercapacitors. Ballast of 100lb was fitted in the bellhousing to represent the MGU's effect on total weight.

To slightly offset this increase, IndyCar has proposed lighter magnesium casings for the gearboxes, and these were also fitted to the cars in the test.

Despite regular rainfall, Power and Dixon clocked up almost 600 laps — between 1400 and 1500 miles — and reliability issues were negligible. Stoppages only came when weather alerts revealed lightning in the area.

The hybrid system to be employed next season is the result of collaboration between Chevrolet and Honda, who were forced to halt development of their proposed 2.4-litre engines in order to replace the proposed Mahle device, which was deemed unsuitable for racing applications (see 2 March issue).

The next "2024-spec" test for Honda and Chevrolet will include the full hybrid system, and is likely to be held in late June, again at Indianapolis.

DAVID MALSHER-LOPEZ

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#### IN THE HEADLINES

#### **RECORD SPA 24H ENTRY**

A 72-car entry described by the organiser as a record has been released for the Spa 24 Hours round of the GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup on 1-2 July. The entry matches the grid for the Belgian enduro in 2019, but this year there will be 72 GT3 cars – one slot four years ago was filled by an invited entry.

#### **NEARY MOVES INTO EUROPE**

British GT Championship race winner Sam Neary is to compete in the GTWCE Endurance Cup for the first time in 2023. Neary has joined Lamborghini squad Grasser Racing Team to race a Huracan GT3 Evo2 in the Silver Cup with Italian Fabrizio Crestani and Australian Ricky Capo.

#### **JONES IN NASCAR DEBUT**

Anglo-Emirati ex-IndyCar racer Ed Jones joined Jenson Button in making his NASCAR debut at Austin last weekend. Jones, third in the 2017 Indy 500, qualified mid-grid in 23rd place for the Truck Series race in a Young's Motorsports Chevrolet, but went out of the race on the first lap with suspension problems.

#### **GARCIA FOR F1 ACADEMY**

W Series race winner Marta Garcia has taken the last slot on the 15-car grid for the inaugural running of the all-female F1 Academy series. The Spaniard has joined Prema in the contest run for F4 cars, and is one of six ex-W Series drivers in the field.

#### **CAMARA CLICKS IN TEST**

Ferrari protege Rafael Camara topped last week's two-day Formula Regional European Championship by Alpine test at Paul Ricard. The Brazilian (below), third in last year's Italian F4 rankings, has stayed with Prema Racing for his step up and, on the second day, he outpaced the first-day time of Maceo Capietto (Team RPM) by 0.122 seconds. Camara's team-mate, double F4 champion and Mercedes junior Andrea Kimi Antonelli, was third fastest, followed by R-ace GP's Barcelona test-topper Tim Tramnitz.





# Toyotas switch to bespoke engines as Gamble arrives

**BTCC** 

Toyota's British Touring Car Championship team has switched to a bespoke engine for its expanded three-car attack in 2023. Neil Brown Engineering is producing a new powerplant for Speedworks Motorsport's trio of Corolla GR Sports as the Cheshire team makes the switch from the TOCA customer engine.

The team has also snapped up George Gamble, who had an impressive BTCC rookie season in 2022 with the Ciceley Motorsport squad, to join the incumbent pair of Rory Butcher and Ricky Collard. Scotsman Butcher stays on for a third season at Speedworks, a team with which he took a total of four wins across 2021-22, while Collard has gone back on his decision to hang up his helmet and instead plumped for a second full season in the series in which his father Rob was a leading contender for many seasons.

Top engine company NBE's acquisition of the Toyota deal comes on top of its long-standing programme as tuner for the hugely successful West Surrey Racingbuilt BMWs. The Lincolnshire firm has also won multiple titles with the Team Dynamics Hondas, although uncertainties surround what format the Midlands operation's programme will take in 2023.

Speedworks' testing with the new Toyota unit began on Tuesday of this week at Anglesey, with Butcher, Gamble and Collard at the wheel of three separate cars.

"It's going really well," said Butcher after the first day of running. "Today's the first day that we've run the engines and there's a lot that goes on behind the scenes, and we're just shaking them down. My first impressions are really good. Neil Brown have been in this championship for donkey's years and that's really shown.

"Between the three of us we're just making sure there are no weak spots, and we plan to get some proper miles in tomorrow [Wednesday] and Thursday. Then our proper testing programme kicks in next week."

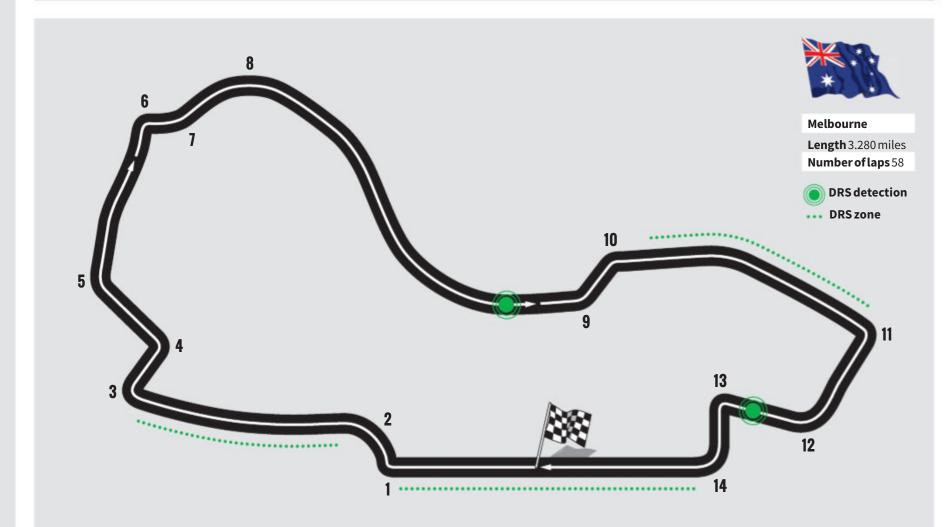
"The TOCA unit has played an important role in our success down the years in the BTCC, but to take the final step and really fight for the championship, we needed control over all elements of the package — and that is what we now have," added Speedworks chief Christian Dick.

Of Gamble's arrival, Dick said: "George caught our attention early on last year — it takes a pretty special talent to win a race as a BTCC rookie — and while his surname might be Gamble, we're confident that his signing will prove to be no risk at all."

MARCUS SIMMONS

#### F1 AUSTRALIAN GRAND PRIX PREVIEW





#### **UK START TIMES**

Friday 31 March **FP1** 0230 **FP2** 0600

Saturday 1 April **FP3** 0230 **QUALIFYING** 0600

**Sunday 2 April RACE** 0600

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#### **CHAMPIONSHIP POSITIONS**

#### **Drivers**

1	Verstappen	44
2	Perez	43
3	Alonso	30
4	Sainz	20
5	Hamilton	20

#### **Constructors**

1	Red Bull	87
2	Aston Martin	38
3	Mercedes	38
4	Ferrari	26
5	Alpine	8



#### **MELBOURNE STATS**

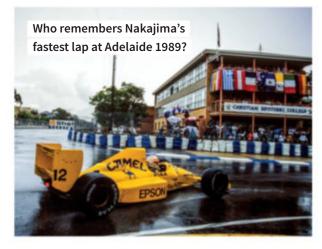
#### Dravious winners

Previous winners				
Charles Leclerc	Ferrari			
Valtteri Bottas	Mercedes			
Sebastian Vettel	Ferrari			
Sebastian Vettel	Ferrari			
Nico Rosberg	Mercedes			
<b>Lewis Hamilton</b>	Mercedes			
Nico Rosberg	Mercedes			
Kimi Raikkonen	Lotus			
Jenson Button	McLaren			
Sebastian Vettel	Red Bull			
	Charles Leclerc Valtteri Bottas Sebastian Vettel Sebastian Vettel Nico Rosberg Lewis Hamilton Nico Rosberg Kimi Raikkonen Jenson Button			

2022 POLE POSITION **Charles Leclerc** 1m17.868s

**POLE LAP RECORD Charles Leclerc** 1m17.868s (2022)

RACELAPRECORD **Charles Leclerc** 1m20.260s (2022)



#### Laps led

-upo iou	
<b>Michael Schumacher</b>	198
Sebastian Vettel	194
<b>Lewis Hamilton</b>	152
Jenson Button	150
Kimi Raikkonen	100
Nico Rosberg	83
David Coulthard	80
Mika Hakkinen	72
Fernando Alonso	61
V Bottas & C Leclerc	58



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# A glimmer of hope for Ferrari?

The Italian squad's previous race-winning form in Melbourne offers the possibility of a turnaround in fortune following a lacklustre start to the 2023 season

**ALEX KALINAUCKAS** 

an it really be that Charles Leclerc left the 2022
Australian Grand Prix with a crushing win, dominant over Max Verstappen even before the Dutchman's retirement? And with it, establish a 34-point lead in the standings of a championship (46 over Verstappen) in which he was ultimately comprehensively defeated?

Not only did he do all that, but this time a year ago it was Red Bull facing a massive reliability worry, while Ferrari seemed to have something of an edge on performance at the start of Formula 1's new ground-effects era. A significant weight loss for the RB18 followed for the next round at Imola and Ferrari, for various mainly self-inflicted reasons, was never truly on top again. Red Bull has, results-wise, really been running rampant for a full year.

Twelve months later, Leclerc is eighth in the drivers' championship, Ferrari fourth in the constructors', and Carlos Sainz suggested last time out in Jeddah that it has lost its place as Red Bull's main rival given Aston Martin's off-season gains and Mercedes' strength even with a package it is about to abandon.

Ferrari's poor reliability in Bahrain and the knock-on to Jeddah is behind Leclerc's lowly championship positioning. He has been one of the team's few bright spots so far in 2023, threatening pole in the season opener and in round two even with his looming engine penalty. Another small Ferrari success story is its pitstops — its mechanics have produced the fastest in each of the opening two races.

#### "The team insists its defeats have been down to set-up choices impacting tyre performance"

Red Bull's stifling success is leaving many F1 observers looking for such small glimmers to provide hope as Verstappen looks set to sweep to a third successive title, unless Sergio Perez can maintain his Jeddah form for the rest of the campaign. So, the recent F1 history of Melbourne's Albert Park circuit can provide some stimulus for Ferrari. At a track where it enjoys considerable support, it can boast three wins from the previous four races. At the very least this shows how certain venues can reward teams that are struggling in the face of overwhelming opposition superiority. Similarly, Red Bull could genuinely bother and beat Mercedes in Monaco at the start of the turbo hybrid era.

In Leclerc's dominant 2022 Melbourne display, Ferrari got the vital set-up adjustments considering track evolution and event temperature changes right. Red Bull got its sums wrong regarding

packing on downforce for the added race day heat, and ended up with badly grained tyres at this front-limited venue.

Leaning on this experience when applying the calculations required for getting the best from the new 2023 Pirellis in Melbourne will be an important boon for Ferrari, which felt it was closer to Red Bull on another front-limited layout in Jeddah. But the Melbourne circuit can further boost Ferrari, because the best lap times will require good traction — something the red cars were tracked as possessing more of than Red Bull in Bahrain and Jeddah.

The Melbourne crowd is finally set to see the reprofiled layout's four DRS zones in action — the fast, sweeping blast section of Turns 8-9 dropped ahead of FP3 last year on safety grounds, but with campaigning from some teams too. The FIA is committed to the whole set this time around, which could mean the fastest F1 speeds ever logged at Albert Park, possibly reaching 210mph.

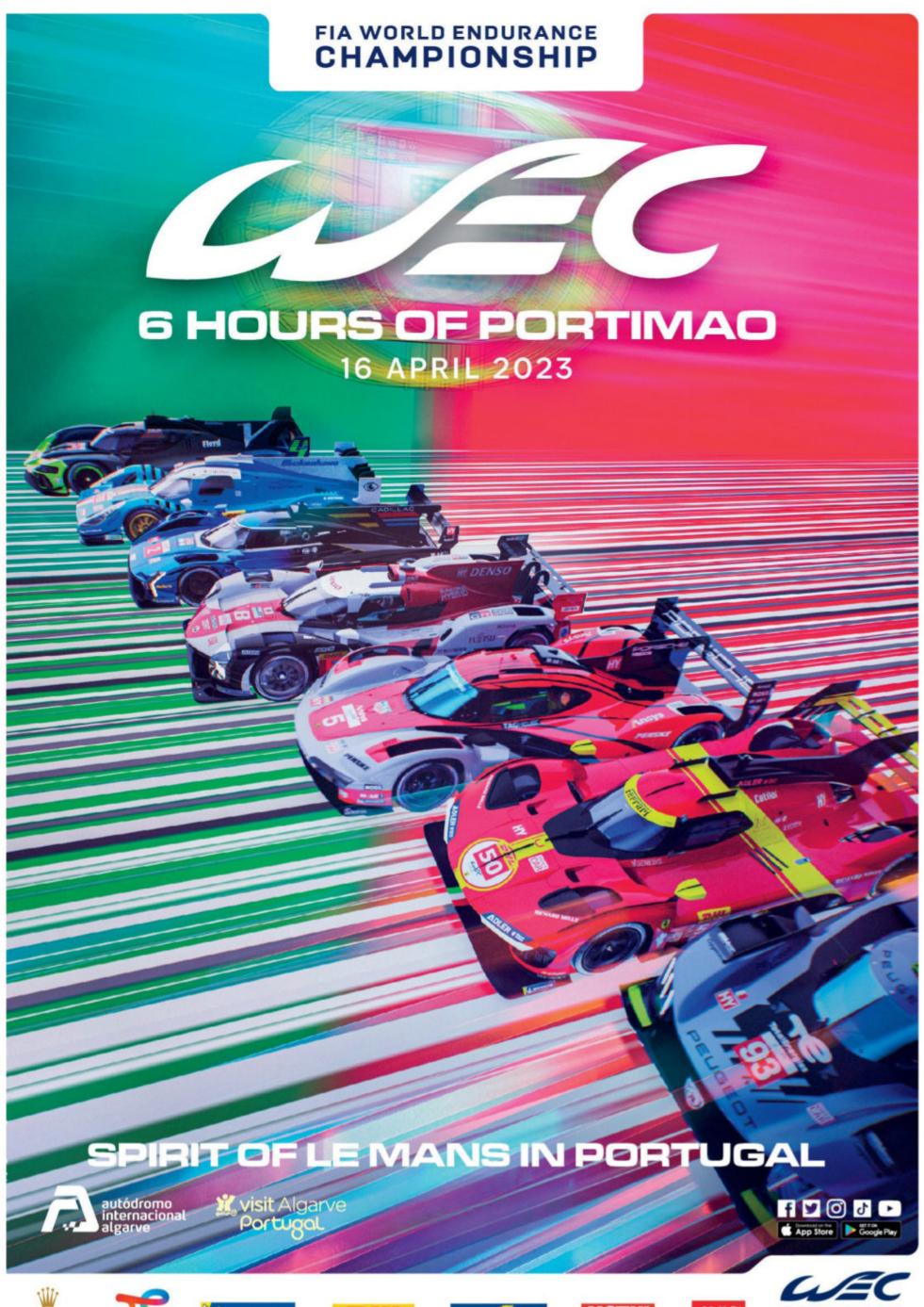
The major track work conducted ahead of Melbourne's postpandemic return to the F1 calendar was completed as part of a bid to enhance overtaking. But, even with four DRS zones, this will still be a challenge given the track's narrow street-circuit nature, and this could be seen in the hardly action-packed 2022 event.

Perhaps then, Leclerc getting among the Red Bulls in qualifying could result in long-held high positioning in the race. Pirelli keeping its compound choice to an in-step C2-C3-C4 should also widen strategy options this time, after its C2-C3-C5 approach meant the softest was a qualifying-only tyre in 2022. But the C2 undid Ferrari's Saudi race when it struggled to get and keep the hard rubber warm enough to be competitive...

Red Bull remains the heavy favourite this weekend. And to have any success, Ferrari will have to defeat the rapid Fernando Alonso for the first time in a 2023 race too. Ferrari is expected to bring minor updated parts to this round. And that summed up the state of play for Maranello leaving Jeddah — the team insists that its defeats have so far been down to set-up choices impacting tyre performance and management, not that its car's aerodynamic package is bad.

Melbourne is the last of the three outlier track types that F1 seasons have begun with in recent years. But with two more fast street tracks coming up in Baku and Miami before more 'normal' ground returns at Imola and Barcelona (with Monaco in between), Ferrari is running out of specific circuit ranges where the SF-23's altered approach in shedding peak downforce for straightline gains, compared to 2022's F1-75, can shine.

Team boss Fred Vasseur said in Jeddah that Ferrari"cannot bullshit ourselves", that "we have to change, we have to understand where we are wrong, and we have to push". But this begs the question of when Ferrari may have to act drastically so that it can finally close the gap again to Red Bull and not have to rely on specific tracks or circumstances to gain a fleeting edge...."





















# Tech silly season has started early

Just two races into the new Formula 1 season and the market for engineering talent is bustling as underperformers endeavour to play catch-up

JAKE BOXALL-LEGGE

t'll be a few months before the Formula 1 driver market for next year truly begins, so there's plenty of time for the current drivers to set out their stalls for a space on the grid in 2024.

It seems, however, that the hypothetical market square in F1-ville is nonetheless occupied in these spring months after just two races. McLaren has already done its business with a restructuring of its technical department; David Sanchez will move to the team from Ferrari at the end of this year, and James Key has been let go following the team's disappointing start to 2023. The engineer market is open for business, with no shortage of teams looking to turn their fortunes around.

When a new aerodynamic ruleset was introduced for last year, engineers were effectively diving into the introduction of venturieffect underbodies blind. The principles behind it have been known for years but, in the context of modern F1, few knew how best to employ them. Once the 2022 pecking order emerged, the teams that hadn't quite got the new formula right got another shot at developing a concept for 2023, armed with a year's knowledge. It seemed that those in charge of the 10 teams were willing to be lenient with failing to make the best assault on the 2022 rules at the start. An unsuccessful second bite at the cherry, however, would be cast in a considerably dimmer light.

Key has now paid the price with his job. The MCL60 isn't the disaster it's made out to be, but its start to life has been troubled and the Woking squad has yet to score points. Team principal Andrea Stella began his new role at the start of 2023 by openly addressing that the technical direction of the team had been wrong, and a course-correction in September last year is set to bear fruit later.

When McLaren was in the nadir of its Honda years in the late 2010s, Key was one of those tasked with building on a strong start to 2019. Under his technical leadership, the team once more began to challenge for podiums. But it was caught out by the 2022 regulations; while last year's MCL36 was still a podium finisher, McLaren lost development time with the Bahrain testing brake nightmares and slipped behind Alpine in the constructors' championship. The new car has fallen even further behind, perhaps only the seventh-fastest on the 2023 grid in its current form.

With Sanchez not officially joining the team until January 2024, his impact will not be known until next year's car undergoes its in-season development. Regardless, Key's departure should not impact the introduction of the new McLaren wind tunnel too much.

Although teams must be wary of making change for the sake of it, it's evident that McLaren has stagnated of late. Getting Sanchez, a key part of a Ferrari team that was able to make the 2022-spec rules work, should be a significant boost to McLaren's fortunes.

Elsewhere on the grid, there are teams that are happy with their

technical departments — Red Bull and Aston Martin — and those who could do with bolstering. Williams is still on the hunt for a technical director under new principal James Vowles, and it could be a role that Key would be well suited to. The Briton has a wealth of experience of leading the engineering side of lower—midfield teams, with Sauber and Toro Rosso also on his resumé.

Otherwise, Andretti's prospective F1 entry is currently hoovering up ex-F1 personnel. Nick Chester has been installed as the technical lead at the American hopeful, with ex-Jordan and Manor designer

#### "It's known that some at Red Bull chafe slightly when Adrian Newey soaks up all the credit"

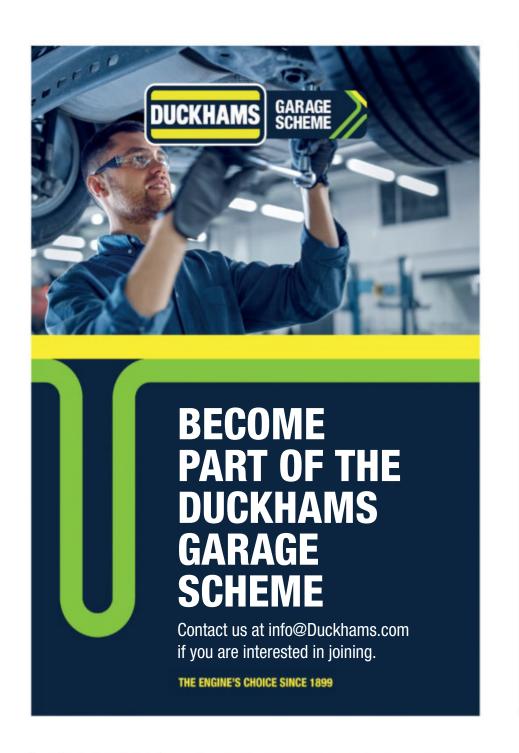
John McQuilliam and ex-Williams aero head Jon Tomlinson also understood to be on board. Key might prefer something a little more tangible at this stage or, if there are other potential F1 entries on the horizon, he could be persuaded to head up an all-new project.

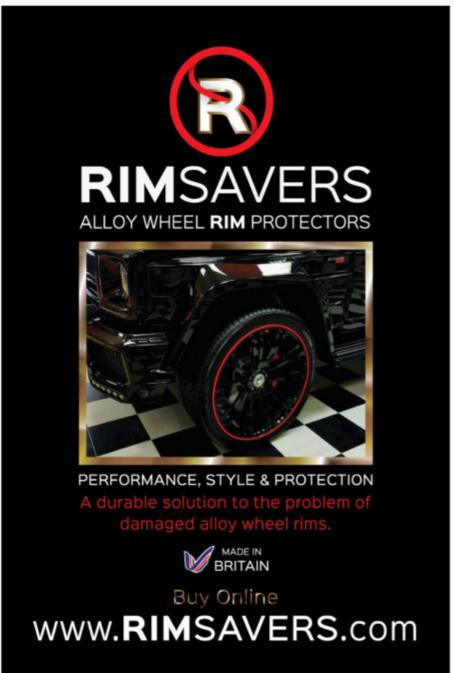
AlphaTauri also appears to be in the mood for hiring, given Franz Tost's recent mouthing off about the squad's technical department. It's hard to argue against technical director Jody Egginton's methods for a team of AlphaTauri's stature, since he was the main figure responsible for aligning more closely with the lead Red Bull team. The squad was more autonomous under Key; although it did more of its own design, it left a similar scale of workforce trying to cover more ground. The ATO4 hasn't yet measured up to expectations, but it's difficult to see the team returning to its older ways.

Credit must go to Aston Martin for having done its business well in advance, with Dan Fallows's signing telegraphed as far back as 2021. Eric Blandin's hiring from Mercedes was announced around then too, as Aston sought to get the right people into the right places early.

Although there's more to the technical teams than just those in charge, and it's known that some at Red Bull chafe slightly when Adrian Newey soaks up all the credit, good guidance can help produce a very strong car. The influence of Fallows in the Aston operation is evident, and no doubt Red Bull will have to withstand a few more high-value offers from other teams looking to walk a similar road.

McLaren is now walking its own road, having struggled to get on terms with the current aero formula, and a reshuffle should offer renewed vigour. And it's none too soon; Audi will start to get more involved with Sauber and aim to strengthen the Jan Monchaux-led technical team at Hinwil in its efforts to challenge for titles. A possible 11th team will further saturate the market, too.







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## Ready for a grandstand finish

A change to the regulations for the Le Mans 24 Hours makes a super-close winning margin much more likely. Great for entertainment, but not so good for purists

**GARY WATKINS** 

produced a grandstand finish — perhaps the closest ever in its history — in this, the centenary year for the French enduro. I reckon there's a decent chance

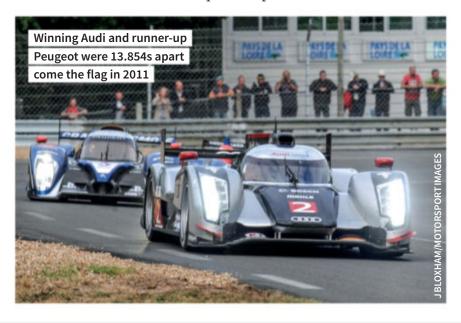
of that happening as the clock strikes four on 11 June, and I'm not making that prediction because the sell-out crowd is going to be watching one of the best fields in the top class in years with Toyota, Ferrari, Porsche et al. I'm saying it because there has been a rule change for 2023 that makes it all the more likely.

hat a story it would be if the Le Mans 24 Hours

A close finish would be great for the spectators massed in the old stands and on the terracing opposite the pits, and great for TV and the profile of the race as the World Endurance Championship kicks on into what is sure to be a halcyon age. But what if it's totally artificial? Is that what we really want to be talking and writing about on Sunday evening of the second weekend of June?

The reason the odds have shortened on the record for the narrowest winning margin in the history of the great race being surpassed is a change to the sporting regulations. And it's one that offends the purist in me. New safety car regulations will do away with the old procedure involving three course vehicles out on the 8.47-mile length of the Circuit de la Sarthe. Or at least there won't be three safety cars out on track at the magic moment when the field is released. Instead there will be just one, and the field will be lined up according to class — Hypercar at the front, of course — when the lights go out.

There has been no explanation of the change, so far, but it has clearly been made in the name of entertainment, to spice up the show if you like. Le Mans organiser and WEC promoter the Automobile Club de l'Ouest knows it has a great product now with seven marques — and all the right ones, with the return of Ferrari and Porsche to the top of the sportscar tree. It has



the quantity and the quality, and it understandably wants to promote that to a wider audience.

But is a short, sharp race to the flag in the traditions of Le Mans? I ask that question as someone who has never hidden his frustration at the surfeit of safety cars over on the other side of the Pond at the Daytona 24 Hours. One year at the Florida enduro in the pre-merger days of Grand-Am, an era when race control was far more trigger-happy when it came to cautions than it is today, I made an outlandish proclamation as I watched the final stages of the race unfold. Or rather, waited for them to unfold as the cars droned around behind that de rigueur final-hour safety car.

My comment went something like this: "Next year, I'm not pitching up at the track for the race 'til a couple of hours to go." I postulated that the best place to keep an eye on proceedings would be the branch of the well-known — and not particularly politically correct — bar chain right across the International Speedway Boulevard from the track. Only as the race drew to a close would it be time, I reckoned, to mosey on over to take my place in front of the timing screens and monitors.

Americans will also tell you that motor racing is first and foremost entertainment. Call me old fashioned, but I beg to differ. It's a sport that people happen to find entertaining.

Sport needs to be about fairness, which is why there has been a drive to mitigate the effects of caution periods on motor races. The trend in recent years in the European realm of racing has been to try to avoid them in the name of sporting equity. That's one of the reasons why we now have virtual safety cars in Formula 1 and Full Course Yellows (the same thing under a different name) in sportscar racing. Then there are the Slow Zones at Le Mans, which are in effect local FCYs.

A single safety car on a circuit measuring three and a bit miles is one thing; just the one on a track more than eight miles in length is quite another. A car crew might have a lead of, say, three minutes after something approaching 20 hours, and then have it wiped out by a safety car. A three-minute advantage at, say, Monza would be a couple of laps, which is why the old safety car rules made sense.

And as much as endurance racing might be out of step with the modern age and the need for instant gratification, Le Mans still has an enduring appeal. You only have to look at the fact that this year's 24 Hours has long since been sold out to understand that. Or that Autosport's Le Mans editions — the preview supplement and race report issues — are among our best-selling of the year.

Le Mans doesn't need gimmicks, and shouldn't be messed with. If the 13.854s that stood between Andre Lotterer's Audi and Simon Pagenaud's Peugeot in 2011 — the closest timed finish at Le Mans — is beaten this year after a late safety car, it'll grab the headlines around the world. But I'll be writing about it with a heavy heart. \*\*

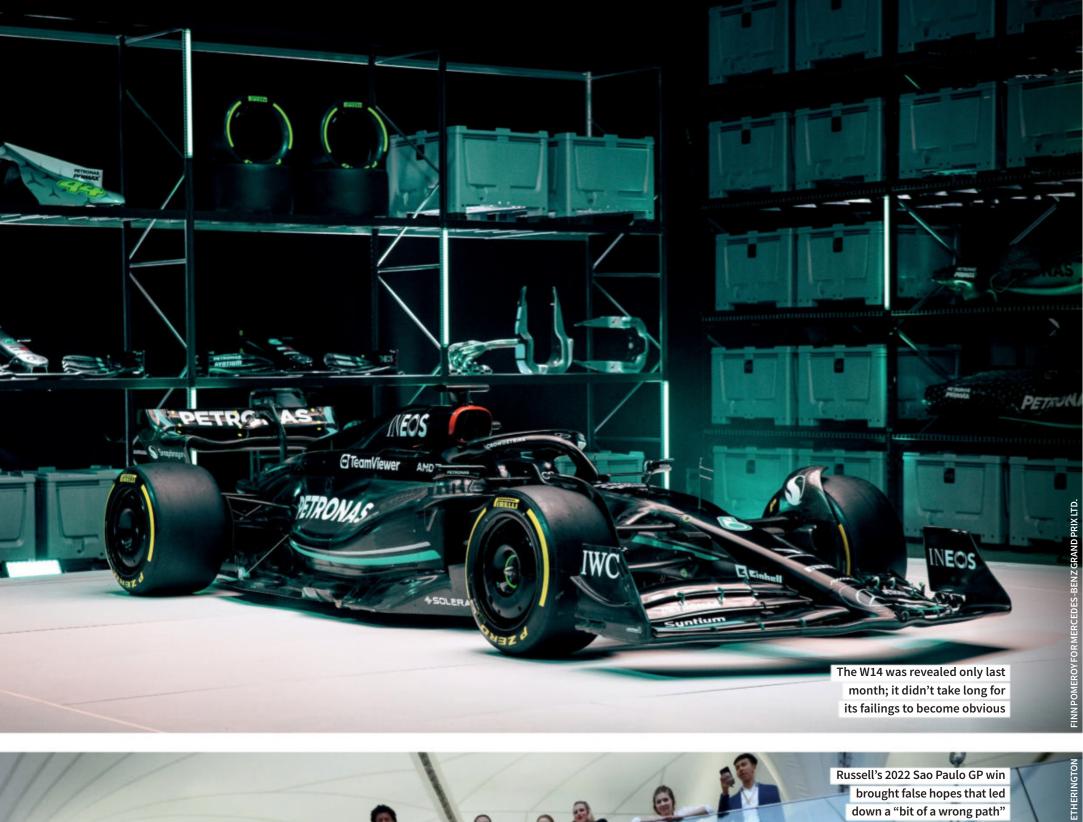
# and the second s moment drove the car where we were and the challenges that we would be facing"

Lewis Hamilton reckoned very early on that this season would be tricky, and now Mercedes is set to change course in a bid to get back to the front

**ALEX KALINAUCKAS** 









ts cars may be a different colour in 2023, back to the inspiring black livery in which Lewis Hamilton powered to Formula 1 world title glory in 2020 and so nearly again in 2021, but there's a clear sense of deja vu for Mercedes. This settled in, hard, at the Bahrain Grand Prix earlier this month. But the team has already decided to twist: the W14's car'concept', begun in the infamous W13, will be abandoned.

That is despite the fact that Mercedes has finally been able to move on from the severe porpoising and ride bouncing it suffered across 2022. And the fact that last time out in the Saudi Arabian GP, it beat a Ferrari on merit in qualifying and defeated both red cars in the race, albeit with a little bit of safety car assistance.

"I don't think this package is going to be competitive eventually," team boss Toto Wolff concluded after qualifying in Bahrain, astonishing the F1 paddock with his frankness and decisiveness after just one session in competition, on a track renowned as an outlier. "We gave it our best shot all over the winter, and now we just need to all regroup and sit down with the engineers, who are totally not dogmatic about anything."

So, that's it, then. Soon, Mercedes' striking'zeropod' design will be confined to F1 folklore — remembered perhaps along with Tyrrell o25 X-wings, the McLaren MP4/10B mid-wing or Williams FW26 walrus nose as dazzling missteps. It's that concept, and plenty of other design ideas, from the W13 of 2022 that led Mercedes to this point in time — one where it stands at the precipice of uncharted, dangerous territory for a squad that dominated F1 for nearly a decade.

As with many teams at the start of F1's new ground-effects era, Mercedes had to spend a huge amount of time and resources in fixing the porpoising and ride issues that were dominating the championship's storylines this time last year. Back then, those were coming in the wake of what was still a thrilling battle of Red Bull versus Ferrari, Max Verstappen versus Charles Leclerc.

The minutiae of how Mercedes found solutions became the central storyline of the team's 2022 season,, encompassing critical Barcelona and Austin upgrades, that sensational George Russell victory in Brazil, plus near-misses for Hamilton and his tenacity even with a struggling car. But Mercedes now feels that its progress in 2022 led it down, according to Russell, a"bit of a wrong path".

That upward curve made Mercedes believe that the W13 and the zeropod arrangement could finally be converted into the rapid machine the initial 2021-22 simulations and wind-tunnel test results had suggested it should be. A winter of fettling and tweaking was required, getting rid of the inherent problems the team said were 'baked in' to last year's design and had trapped potential and lap time.

"We had the perfect storm last year," Wolff explained. "The car got better and better, and then you start to question the concept of the car less than you probably should."

Having done that, Mercedes launched the W14 at Silverstone on 15 February. There were rumours of a disrupted shakedown. But that wasn't the reason for its deliberately cautious messaging on the year ahead, with Wolff admitting even in the team's press material that Mercedes'2023 car would be "playing catch-up", but could still "eventually be competitive enough to fight at the very front of the grid".

Ultimately, Mercedes was trying to avoid the situation in which it found itself in early 2022, when Hamilton boldly predicted that he'd reach new driving peaks in a bid to immediately wrest his crown back from Verstappen following the bitter disappointment of the Abu Dhabi officiating fiasco. But, based on subsequent statements, we can

"We had the perfect storm last year.

The car got better and better, and then you start to question the concept of the car less than you probably should"



deduce that reservations regarding the W14's potential as a W13 evolution had apparently already taken hold.

"I knew that we weren't in the right place when you saw the car for the first time," Hamilton said ahead of the Jeddah event. "It looked still so much different to those of our competitors and it's always nerve-racking in that moment..."

But, back ahead of Bahrain pre-season testing and the season opener on the same Sakhir layout, Mercedes pressed ahead with its plans for the W14 in its current guise. The test did not go brilliantly, with a hydraulic pump problem stopping Russell on the second of three days, and mid-corner handling issues also apparent. But the team's progress on its car balance ahead of the race left Russell, at least, more confident. And for the Bahrain race weekend it switched to a low-downforce aerodynamic package and introduced a new, svelte rear wing — things it couldn't do during the first part of 2022.

The rise of Mercedes engine customer Aston Martin had been obvious in testing, but the team still entered the initial competitive sessions of the new season reasonably confident, buoyed by the confirmation that porpoising and bouncing were "gone essentially", according to Wolff, in testing.

Wolff had explained at its launch that the W14 was likely to undergo something of a notable design change in the early phase of 2023. And after Bahrain testing the message from within Mercedes was the same — that come the Imola race in May, following the four-week gap between round three in Australia and the Baku/Miami doubleheader, a planned upgrade that would change at least some of the car's upper aero surfaces was still on.

Then came the stark "real reality check", in the words of technical director Mike Elliott, of the rest of the Bahrain race weekend. After FP2, Mercedes insiders discovered they'd actually underestimated Aston's potential as a frontrunning threat based on Fernando Alonso's long-run pace being comparable with Verstappen's. Then, in qualifying, Russell led Hamilton in sixth and seventh, the leading Briton 0.632 seconds off Verstappen's pole-winning pace. That compares with Hamilton being 0.680s behind Leclerc in the same session a year earlier. On the surface, not a disaster, but clearly not where Mercedes expected to be.

This turned out to be the central thrust of the decision to make massive changes to the W14's design, and the basis for Wolff's press conference appearance on that Saturday night that banished his launch comments about the car "eventually" being a winner. Mercedes had hit its design targets and done exactly what it had set out to achieve, but those aims were ultimately wrong. And following them to the next stages surely meant never catching Red Bull.

"We really tried hard to make it work because the data that we >>

have extrapolated showed us that this works,"Wolff said subsequently in Saudi Arabia. "We were proven wrong. Very simply. You can see that the three quickest cars, including the Ferraris, have a similar concept of how they generate performance. That's very different to ours. All of us involved in the decision–making process came to the conclusion that we can't continue that way."

Two days after Hamilton and Russell had finished fifth and seventh respectively in the season opener, a crunch meeting with the drivers and the team's senior management and engineering staff took place at its Brackley base. "Very good, honest, open conversations" were had, according to Russell. It evokes memories of Hamilton revealing that there had been "constructive arguments" regarding the W13's weaknesses at a similar point in 2022. But the outcome this time was decidedly different — Mercedes will now fundamentally change its car concept and, surely, set off down the path pioneered by Red Bull and already copied by several other teams.

"A lot of the questions were answered as to how we got ourselves in this position in the first place," Russell added. "Plus, 'What are we going to do in the short term, and medium term, to get out of it? What path do we want to be on?' Those changes are already in place, getting on the track that we believe is going to bring us back to victory."

What Mercedes currently has in the W14 is a still-draggy package that is also missing ultimate downforce. It can't compete with Red Bull on the straights, and in trying to do so produces sliding in the corners that robs its drivers of confidence and, particularly in Bahrain, then eats through their tyres.

Hamilton is now openly saying that he's struggling with getting the most from the W14. It hurts the seven-time world champion most when pushing flat-out in qualifying, which perhaps at least partly explains why he currently trails Russell 2-0 in their qualifying head-to-head. While Hamilton, inevitably, isn't going into details just yet, he's suggested the problem mostly concerns that unstable rear handling.

Throughout his F1 career, Hamilton has struggled with braking instability — it steals confidence and in turn speed when trying to get back on the gas quickly. This was a particular issue with the W13's season-long bucking last year, but Hamilton's current problem is thought to be more concerned with how Mercedes' new rear suspension design works with its critical downforce-producing parts on the floor and diffuser.

This whole area is where Red Bull's RB19, as the RB18 did, works extremely well, generally staying very stable through all corner types and elevation changes. This means its already high level of downforce stays packed on, boosting Verstappen and Sergio Perez further still.

 $\hbox{``We're a long way down on downforce,"} Hamilton stated in Jeddah.$ 

"So, we've got to pick up the rear end downforce particularly. The more rear we gain, the more stable the rear becomes, and the more confident I'll be able to attack.

"But I think in general, just this car, even if we do change that, there's a specific thing with something on the car that I have never had before. It's a position I've not had in previous years' cars. For me it's the thing that is making me uncomfortable. I've just got to work hard to make sure it is changed."

Exactly how the W14's major redesign plays out will now be the story of Mercedes'2023. But exactly what is going to be changed first, and how fast, is still the source of much intrigue. At Mercedes in particular, because of its current very different sidepod design, talk of a concept change "means different things to different people", says Elliott.

Whenever the term was mentioned to Mercedes' engineers in 2022, they would typically reply that what made the real difference on F1's new ground-effects machines were the underfloor venturi tunnels, the floor edges and fences, and how all that works with diffusers and suspension parts.

To most F1 observers, sidepod design is what comes to mind first given it's a very visible upper aero surface, and because those initially employed by Red Bull, Ferrari and Mercedes in particular all looked very different to each other. But although they *are* of secondary importance to performance on a ground-effects car, they remain critical parts of the overall design.

This all matters because before the decision was taken to completely rewrite the W14 concept, Mercedes had targeted that sidepod change for May's visit to Imola. Logically, that will now take on even greater potential importance and surely be of wider scope.

"The engineers are busy, looking at aerodynamics; they are looking at the shape of the car, things like the sidepod geometry, the floor geometry, 'have we missed a trick?'" Elliott explained after Jeddah. "But we are also looking in the simulation world: 'Are we targeting the right things? Are we pushing the aerodynamics in the right direction?'

"We're looking at the mechanical set-up of the car: 'Are there things there that we are missing? What else can we bring to the car that is going to add performance?' And we're trying to do that as fast as we possibly can, because we want to get back to the front."

But, of course, there are other factors at play for Mercedes, particularly F1's cost cap restrictions. The base \$135million spending limit means the team cannot just produce an entirely new W14B. Even with major upgrades sprinkled throughout the year, which are now set to be very different to what the team had initially planned, certain parts will have to remain the same until the W15 appears in 2024.

In the short term, Mercedes is faced with a choice of either

"We were proven wrong. Very simply. You can see that the three quickest cars have a similar concept of how they generate performance. That's very different to ours"

abandoning its Imola upgrade to pursue something more substantial on a new car concept path later, or bringing it anyway to evaluate the data it will produce. Given Wolff has said that his team is now deciding "which direction we are going in and put all the resources behind it", it would make sense to assume that the evolution updates for the initial W14 design would be dropped so the new concept can be more fully implemented in 2023.

While that is going on, Mercedes can, declares Russell, unleash "performance in the locker in some races to come". This means the team expects to make set-up adjustments around its existing design to gain performance, although obviously not enough to fully close the gap to the runaway Red Bull.









Mercedes was initially running the W14 too high as part of its post-porpoising adjustments, but it has since discovered that the 2023 rule tweaks regarding floor edges and diffuser throats meant this was unnecessary, and between Bahrain and Saudi Russell says its adjustments with this understanding found "more performance in a week than we found in almost a month".

But what Mercedes does in the longer term is of utmost importance for the team itself and everyone else watching. Will it, as Aston did at the 2022 Spanish GP, soon reveal a new, very Red Bull-like shape — the most visible features are the downwash sidepods most of the

grid have adopted since Red Bull's ground-effects package was established as the best — at a coming race?

Elliott had said that the team's initial Imola sidepod tweak would not "be the same as other people's". But now, Wolff is openly stating there would be "no shame" in the altered W14 being very similar in shape to the RB19. "It just needs to be the quickest possible race car," the Austrian said in Jeddah. "And if that car looks like a Red Bull, or like SpaceX, I don't care, it just needs to be quick. And if it's a Red Bull, we will put a little bull sticker somewhere..."

Whenever Mercedes does make its big design move, at Imola or

#### STAFF CHANGES AT MERCEDES

Formula 1's massive global reach and huge fanbase can make many people stars. For the drivers, obviously, this can happen very quickly. Thanks to *Drive to Survive*, most of the current team principals – and a few ex-squad bosses too – have enhanced followings. And, given it's their voices speaking to the drivers during the on-track action, fame can come to race engineers too.

At Mercedes, many of its team members are instantly recognisable, even when not alongside Lewis Hamilton, George Russell or Toto Wolff. That's because Mercedes generally makes its racing team staff available more often with the media, and to an additional extent compared to Red Bull's regular booking for Christian Horner on Sky Sports F1...

Two of its engineers are stars in their own right given their high-profile work. As the voice in Hamilton's ear through six of his world titles, it's little wonder Peter Bonnington is often asked for his autograph. And, as the strategy chief all through Mercedes' dominant spell, James Vowles can point to his own memes online.

Except, of course, Vowles is now the team boss at Williams – he flew the nest just when it looked as though he was being groomed as Wolff's possible replacement should the Austrian decide to step away. Vowles's exit was the highest-profile change in team personnel over the winter, but there have been several other notable tweaks.

Another departure is Hamilton's now ex-trainer, Angela Cullen. She had been ever-present at Hamilton's side since joining him at the start of 2016 as part of her role with athlete coaching company Hintsa



"If that car looks like a Red Bull, or like SpaceX, I don't care, it just needs to be quick. And if it's a Red Bull, we will put a little bull sticker somewhere..."

elsewhere, the nature and scope of the changes will explain how it is going about its car concept overhaul. It will either be something so massive that Red Bull team chief Christian Horner and co will be quipping about a 'black Red Bull', or something smaller that suggests a bigger overhaul coming instead in 2024.

Taking Aston's rise up the pecking order as inspiration, an approach that combines both plans well could be very lucrative in F1 performance terms. Since the decision to abandon Mercedes' initial new groundeffects concept, Wolff says his engineers have discovered "big steps in relative performance to where we are even now", which the team feels has vindicated its choice for change. "There was no step back," Wolff claimed. "On the contrary, there was immediately two steps forward."

Putting those research findings into practical lap time gain is Mercedes' next test — one aided by the upcoming calendar gap. But there's an even bigger trial for the Black Arrows already going on, one that it has not faced ever since it vaulted to the top of the F1 tree at the start of the turbo hybrid era. And that is how it's much-vaunted close team culture will survive a second year racing in the F1 doldrums, which, based on how long it took Aston to leap up the order once it opted to mirror Red Bull's design concept early in 2022, could well be approaching.

This is already showing signs of strain — from paddock speculation over Elliott's position, to the recent *Drive to Survive* scene in which Wolff accosted his fellow team bosses over porpoising at the 2022 Canadian GP. That was a show for the cameras, sure, but also a sign of the pressure he has been facing for some time to recover Mercedes' position as F1's dominant force, with the might of its huge corporate backing looming large and expecting the results to which it had become accustomed.

Hamilton also may have rowed back on comments he made to BBC Radio that Mercedes apparently "didn't listen" to his comments on car design in 2022 when it came to the birth of the W14 — "It wasn't



necessarily the best choice of words," he said in Jeddah — but that was also a rare sign of dissent in the Mercedes camp. This now includes former Red Bull HR director and COO Jayne Poole, who is working with Wolff as a senior advisor to conduct a review of the team to ensure that it is operating at its best.

McLaren's decision to fire its former technical director James Key demonstrates what a team can do in the face of continued failure. But, unlike Ferrari, Mercedes has forged a reputation for not making such moves. That was when it was winning. And let's not forget, Hamilton's next contract remains unsigned, and those negotiations overhang everything currently going on at the team.

Mercedes simply must get its next moves right if it is to arrest its slide down the F1 grid and return to the dominant position Red Bull now occupies. If it doesn't, perhaps for the third season in succession, the second 2024 race will be followed by an Autosport magazine feature asking what has gone wrong...

Finally, everything it must do, it must do fast. "I don't want to lose more time," Wolff concluded in Jeddah. "My colleagues don't want to as well."

# "MERCEDES HAS HIRED ANOTHER FAMILIAR FACE, WHO CAN BOAST 20 F1 RACE STARTS"

Performance, which has long provided trainers to many F1 drivers. The pair posted glowing messages announcing Cullen's departure from Hamilton's team during the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix weekend but, with the change coming after she'd attended the Bahrain season-opener, that led to questions about the true nature of the split.

As well as signing former Red Bull HR director and COO Jayne Poole, Mercedes has also hired another familiar paddock face - and this one can boast 20 F1 race starts. Former Marussia and one-time Lotus driver Jerome D'Ambrosio has arrived as Mercedes' driver development director, taking over some of the responsibilities in this area that Vowles had in 2022. He will work alongside the team's existing young driver guru Gwen Lagrue, who played a key role in the rise of Russell, and Esteban Ocon before the Frenchman made

his switch to Renault/Alpine.

Having initially joined Mercedes in an informal capacity for the Bahrain test and race events, D'Ambrosio was revealed in his official role in Jeddah and "is looking at things [with Mercedes' F1 operation], and there's plenty of scope with what James did beyond the strategy work [to be added to his responsibilities]", said Wolff. He added of the ex-Formula E racer and Venturi team principal: "I see Jerome growing in the organisation but, at this stage, [driver development is] his area."



## AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES

BTCC technical chief Peter Riches stepped down from his role at the end of the 2022 season after 27 years at the helm. He's presided over huge transition in the series, has played a huge part in its success, and now he's handing over to his son

#### MARCUS SIMMONS



e's the architect of the current British Touring Car Championship ruleset. He's the guy who has kept everyone on the technical straight-and-narrow. He's a man who has been responsible for performance balancing of the cars in a way not so much to keep everyone happy, but to prevent anyone from being too *un*happy. And, in the words of BTCC supremo Alan Gow: "He can be an irascible, grumpy old git. But beneath that he's a tremendous enthusiast. That's a difficult combination — you've got to temper your enthusiasm when it comes to the technical aspects."

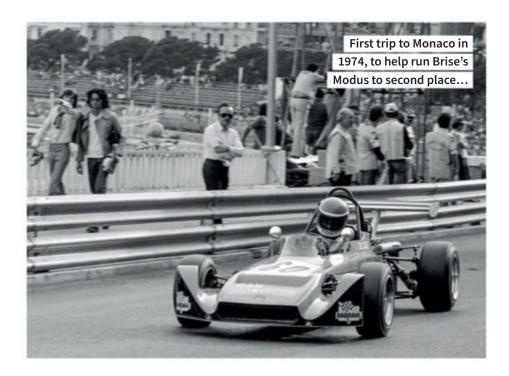
Peter Riches retired from his job as BTCC technical director at the end of last season. It was a role he'd held since the height of the Super Touring era in 1996. Wind further back, and it was 1993 when he first began working in the series as a scrutineer. Thirty years of involvement, now aged 70, it's time to hand things over to a younger generation—in Riches' case literally, because it's son Sam who will take the helm.

The Norfolk man is the archetypal poacher-turned-gamekeeper. While his scrutineering days began in 1982, that came off a background in car preparation in Production Sports Cars (where the rules were necessarily tight and loopholes there to be exploited) and in Special/Super Saloons (where they were anything but), plus a parallel day job with the Lotus Formula 1 team. Riches had become immersed in the sport as a schoolboy during the 1960s, when he went along with the family doctor, who was on duty at Snetterton. "The local GPs wore jackets and had a brown leather bag with their kit in it — how you cut anybody out, I don't know in those days,"he chuckles. "Probably rang the fire brigade or something."

Luckily for Riches, there was a decent motorsport cottage industry in Norfolk: "GRD [a successful Formula 3 constructor of the early 1970s] were in Griston and I did a little bit with them at weekends. Typical schoolboy — you roll up on your bike and they give you a job.

"Also, I used to go to races with a guy called Teddy Savory. My parents knew Teddy's mum and dad really well — he lived in Watton, where I was born. He raced Mick Hill's Boss Capri on occasions and also a Group 2 Escort in the British Saloon Car Championship. He got a bit of money out of Ford — in those days it was easy. Then he set Modus up — he stole Jo Marquart and Nick Jordan from GRD. My first trip to Monaco was





#### "HE CAN BE AN IRASCIBLE, GRUMPY OLD GIT. BUT BENEATH THAT HE'S A TREMENDOUS ENTHUSIAST"

with them for the F3 race in 1974; Tony Brise came second to Tom Pryce.

"And then I cleared off to Leeds University and got involved in the motor club, and we started helping Tate of Leeds. They were running two Formula Atlantic cars — Chris Meek and Malcolm Wayne — and as students we used to jump in our car and go and help them some weekends, and they weren't going to say no because it was free labour. It was a lot easier in those days because there were a lot of one-day meetings — you got up early and got home late, that's what students do. Tates were also running Chris's Princess Ita Escort and then the Atlantic thing came to an end, Tates pulled out, Chris kept the Escort and we had a De Tomaso Pantera [for Prodsports] as well."

Riches stayed on to help run property magnate Meek's next
Prodsports weapon, a Lotus Europa: "Chris had got on with Colin
Chapman, and Chapman built him this slightly special Europa — it had
one less layer of fibreglass in it, so it was lighter. I think we had something
like Mexico camshafts. In those days, if you could produce paperwork for
production sportscars where the manufacturer stated they used that part
in one of their territories, you'd use it. So we had a really hairy Vegantune
originally — followed by Neil Brown — camshaft that was allegedly
fitted to any cars that went to some weird market."

Ah, so an introduction for the young Riches to the vagaries of homologation? "Production sportscars wasn't really homologated," he retorts. "There was a spec sheet, but it was all a bit dodgy. Chris was a pretty good driver but he was a pothunter of the first order, and was far too good really for what he was doing, because if the car had a problem he could just drive round it. I stayed there until I applied for a job at Team Lotus."

This was in the summer of 1978, when Lotus was dominating in >>





Formula 1 with Mario Andretti and Ronnie Peterson at the wheel of its groundbreaking 79. "I applied for assistant team manager to Andrew Ferguson," recalls Riches. "There were two of us — Peter Collins and myself. Peter got the job, but Colin sent me to see Tony Rudd at Lotus Cars, and Tony offered me a job there and then. I was running the machine shop, engine assembly and the fabrication shop, but then Ronnie got killed at Monza, and the old man decided he needed a production manager for Ketteringham Hall because he decided that was the reason why Ronnie had got killed, because there weren't enough spare cars.

"In those days every driver had two cars, but Ronnie's spare was the 78. Mario wouldn't give him his spare 79, and so he had to race the 78

#### "I SAID TO ALAN, 'I CAN'T DO BOTH JOBS PROPERLY', SO HE SAID, 'HOW MUCH?' AND WE DID A DEAL"

[Peterson had crashed his own 79 during the morning warm-up], and the old man partly blamed Ketteringham Hall for Ronnie being killed because there should have been a spare 79 and it was running late. In those days Team Lotus had 50 people on the payroll, that was it. I carried on at Team Lotus until I ran out of 25-hour days, eight-day weeks and 53-week years, and went back to work for Tony. At the time, Lotus Engineering was being recreated — that was the original company — as a consultancy and the deal had been done with DeLorean but that was all, yes, enough has been written about that..."

Riches reports that Lotus Engineering"at one point was working for nearly every manufacturer in the world", but there was still time for additional weekend work. In 1982, he was approached to be a scrutineer and was handed, ironically, the Prodsports category in which he'd worked for Meek. The skulduggery was eye-opening: "I took a Morgan to bits, and that had Weslake heads on it when it was supposed to be a bog standard Rover V8 engine. Morgan started to claim this is how Rover supplied them and of course we had good connections with Rover, and Rover said, 'No — they come straight off the production line, and if Morgan persist in claiming the production engines are supplied like that, we'll just stop offering warranty because they've modified them', at which point Morgan backed down."

Prodsports was soon on the wane, and Riches moved into Ford Fiestas and, subsequently, Formula Ford 1600 and 2000. He then picked up British Formula 3 at the dawn of the 1990s, before the BTCC came calling. By the middle of the decade there were nine manufacturer teams. This was becoming far more than a weekend job...

 $\hbox{``My Lotus work had increased because `Generous' Motors had sold'}\\$ 





the place to Bugatti, and at that point I picked up all the site maintenance including all the production line equipment and everything else, and I had 150 people in the engineering workshops working for me. I said to Alan [Gow] in the middle of 1995, 'Alan I can't keep doing this, you want more and more'. What brought it to a head was some time around May I walked back into my office at 10 o'clock after we'd had a half-past-eight meeting and my secretary gave me 10 messages from teams to ring them. And then she went to the fax machine and there were some faxes for me as well. I said to Alan, 'I can't do both jobs properly', so he said, 'How much?' and we did a deal.

"That was one of the biggest mistakes of my life. I gave my notice in around mid-July so I wasn't going to leave until mid-January 1996, and then buggered off to Knockhill for touring cars because I had to take holiday to do that, and when I got back my boss and the MD were no longer at Lotus. With the new regime, every head of department who worked for the guy I worked for were made redundant, and of course I was just happily working my notice out!"

With a big redundancy payment denied him, Riches began life as a TOCA employee. And it wasn't just the BTCC; he'd been appointed as the FIA's Super Touring technical delegate "because the manufacturers were pushing for somebody to go around the world to all the championships".

It's easy to look back on the Super Touring era with rose-tinted spectacles; indeed, most people do. But it was also full of disagreement over performance balancing (through weight increases) of four-wheel drive (Audi) and rear-wheel drive (BMW) versus front-wheel drive (almost everyone else). "There was an awful lot of politics," says Riches, >>>











#### "THESE ENGINEERS, THEY COME FOR TWO YEARS AND THEN BUGGER OFF AGAIN. F1 SUFFERED THE SAME THING"

"and we [in the BTCC] didn't quite always follow that [FIA] line because we didn't think they were equalising them well enough. I think the problem with that era is every year somebody dominated. I can remember in the Renault domination year [1997], in our August trip to Snetterton Alain Menu let Jason Plato win his first race and Menu stitched up the championship [with three race weekends remaining]. It was the man who spent the most money."

Super Touring had also moved out of the realm of the privateers: "In reality Matt Neal only kept up there because Dynamics were being bunged support by Nissan. They'd tried to design their own Ford and it completely failed — they just couldn't get it on the pace. In the old days they could build a BMW, but this was now out of their league."

By 2000, the BTCC was down to just three manufacturer teams. Furthermore, Gow had agreed a sale of TOCA to Octagon Motorsport. Riches remembers Triple Eight chief Roland Dane plus Vic Lee, who was then running the Peugeot team in the UK's Super Production series, as "the big movers" in a new replacement formula to be known as BTC Touring. Gow professes that "I didn't take an active involvement because I was moving on — there was no point putting my oar in".

BTC Touring, states Riches, "you could argue was the forerunner of NGTC [the ruleset to which the series now runs]. The biggest problem at the end of Super Touring was that the FIA could not agree in the manufacturer working groups on a set of rules, because all these manufacturer teams needed big budgets to justify their existence. We nearly got there with the BTCT regs: we needed four manufacturers [to commit] and we got three [Vauxhall, Peugeot and Nissan, although the last-named never produced a car]. We nearly got BMW. The BMW line was, 'Yeah, we do want to be in touring cars still, but we will do our own gearbox, we will do this, we will do that,' but the others couldn't afford that. So that just didn't happen. And so the FIA were left with no formula, which meant the only thing around was Super Production, which some countries started to run. We decided we didn't want that, and we

managed to convince enough people to go with BTCT.

"Eventually the FIA and the manufacturers decided they did need a formula, and ended up with Super 2000. I have to say it worked fairly well, except we were never convinced that the cars that were in the World Touring Car Championship were the same as people could buy. We had parts breaking on the SEATs when they were being run by Northern South that never broke on the World cars, and every time you talked to Jaime [Puig, SEAT sport chief] and whoever their engineer was at the time, it was, 'Oh they never break on our cars, it must be your drivers, your set-up, your circuits'. And we were convinced they'd got, as you can in homologation, special parts if they look the same. Super 2000 was starting to go wrong, it was getting too expensive again."

From 2004 and through the rest of the decade, Super 2000 ran alongside BTC Touring in the BTCC. Gow had also returned to the helm, in 2003. As if balancing the two rule concepts wasn't difficult enough, Riches also had to work on national homologation for homegrown S2000 machinery such as Triple Eight's Vauxhall Vectra, Team Dynamics'Honda Civic and Arena Motorsport's Ford Focus, but "it was getting too expensive so that's when we came up with the concept of NGTC, which sort of steadied the prices".

Riches credits Gow with the initial idea for the concept, which took the BTCC far away from production racing: "Alan came up with the idea of chopping the front and the back off and I had to make it work. He'd seen something similar." Gow claims that he "got it from somewhere but I can't remember where, but it wasn't a touring car category." "It took the BTCC a step further in that we always argued that running road car bits on racing cars shouldn't be done," continues Riches, "and I think that the SEAT saga convinced us that maybe the bits run at World level weren't the same as were run at national level. We also then looked at all the things that cost a lot of money. We'd gone to Xtrac gearboxes in BTCT, and that slashed the costs like you won't believe because in Super Touring they were nearly all using Xtrac, buying their boxes and





internals, but they were all subtly different, because they all had gearbox designers who'knew better'than Xtrac..."

Riches agrees that the long list of standardised parts in NGTC makes for a smoother scrutineering job. "The suppliers will check the parts," he points out. "They'll take gearboxes apart in parc ferme and check they're their parts; SPA Penske will take dampers apart regularly; AP are always looking at the brakes; ATL a couple of times a year go inside fuel tanks for us; and Cosworth are doing the electronics. So that makes life easier. To be honest I think the world has changed dramatically. If you go back to Group A [to which the BTCC ran from 1983-90], cheating was part of the sport, it was an accepted part of the sport. People tried to bend the rules as much as they could. People from Kidlington tried harder than others... I came across in my filing cabinet the Lord Shawcross judgement on the Walkinshaw Rovers [resulting in the TWR-built Vitesses' mass retrospective exclusion from the 1983 championship] the other day, which must be a museum piece by now.

"Certainly in Super Touring it got less prevalent, because manufacturers were spending big money, and I know some of the teams had clauses in their contracts that if they got caught cheating, they would lose the contracts. Cheating's always been in two groups to me: underweight, wrong tyre, wrong ride height, wrong rear-wing angle are all sort of seen as 'mistakes'; once you start getting inside engines or suspension, then that's seen as deliberate cheating. To be honest, have we found a lot in NGTC? No."Riches then mentions the exception of Dan Welch's 40-point penalty in 2014: "We found Ohlins bits in the Penske dampers, and we found a dodgy camshaft."

Riches'retirement decision didn't come overnight: "I was saying in about 2019 to Alan that I wanted to go, and he kept pushing to say no. He dithered, didn't know what he wanted to do and so it never happened, and then COVID came along and it was never going to happen during COVID. He had several people pushing him about my job. There were engineers in the paddock that wanted it, and I don't think he was ever convinced that any of them were the right people for the job, because there is a tendency that these engineers, they come for two years and then bugger off again. Formula 1 suffered the same thing. My good mate Charlie Whiting had the same problem... I went back with him before he was in Formula 1, because he used to run his brother Nick in Super Saloons against Chris Meek. Charlie recruited Laurent Mekies as his deputy, and then he buggered off back to Ferrari, and then Marcin



Budkowski likewise came and went. And then of course Charlie died in a hurry and they were left with nobody."

It turned out Riches had bred his own succession plan. Son Sam has been in the BTCC technical area since his teens: "Me staying, and lockdown, showed Alan that Sam was the man, because Sam effectively took the hybrid programme. I don't tolerate fools either, and I think some of our modern team owners come in that category. I mean, they're not on the right planet motorsport-wise shall we say..."

Riches will keep an involvement for 2023 in a consultancy role. "I've got two contracts — an unpaid one with Sam, a paid one with Alan," he laughs. "I'll turn up at four meetings this year, just Saturday and Sunday, but I'm still doing working groups — we had an engineering working group meeting the other week. One of the reasons for retiring is because I don't want to be at a circuit every other weekend at seven o'clock in the morning. I'm still doing the British Grand Prix this year as chief, I've been there since 1991, but whether I do it next year remains to be seen. I'm still sitting on Motorsport UK working groups, and I'm still aiming to do some training for them."

Keeping busy then, and he can't tame the enthusiasm. Last word, as with the first, to Gow. "People think I'm difficult, but they haven't met Peter Riches..." he jokes. "He's been an incredibly good technical manager for the championship, incredibly enthusiastic. Even though we'd always discuss things and how to do them, I would never query his judgement." \*\*



JULES GOUNON

# IS THIS THE WORLD'S BUSIEST RACING DRIVER?

Jules Gounon is the reigning winner of the GT endurance classics at Daytona, Bathurst and Spa. But he had to clear numerous hurdles that threatened to end his racing dreams to get there

JAMES NEWBOLD

o hectic was Mercedes factory driver Jules Gounon's racing schedule in February that he spent just one day at home. Following his GTD Pro class victory in the IMSA SportsCar Championship's Daytona 24 Hours, he headed directly down under for the following week's Bathurst 12 Hours and secured a historymaking third successive win — the first three-time winner in the Australian event's history.

Next he headed to Dubai for the opening round of the Asian Le Mans Series, before trekking to Abu Dhabi for its conclusion. There followed a single day at home "because I really need to clean some stuff" before his fifth race weekend on the trot, South Africa's 9 Hours of Kyalami, netted a class win and third overall. As a result, he still heads the Intercontinental GT Challenge going into July's Spa 24 Hours, an event he won for a second time last year.

That Gounon is now one of Mercedes' most prolific GT3 racers, with full programmes in British GT and IMSA GTD Pro alongside his GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup title defence, makes up for a late start in racing — he only began karting as a teenager. The son of ex-Formula 1 racer Jean-Marc Gounon, himself a late starter, didn't have it easy convincing his father, who believed that a racing career would not be feasible "without big money".

So when Gounon Jr did get his chance in karting, it was with a caveat — the funding would stop if success didn't follow. This became a regular theme of a career in which he has so far represented Audi and Bentley as a factory driver, and driven Ferrari and Acura machinery. The 28-year-old believes it has had a profound impact on his approach. "Since the beginning, he always put on me a lot





move to Formula Renault 2.0 for 2014 was a struggle. Without the budget to test, "after a few races it was really clear that it was done. I started to work in my dad's dealership with him and washing cars. It was a very hard moment." But a lifeline appeared in the form of a scholarship for the 2015 French Porsche Carrera Cup. "My grandad paid me the entry fee of the scholarship for my birthday and Christmas," recalls Gounon. "He told me, 'That's the last chance', because my dad was already saying it was done. I went there with that motivation and angriness to destroy everyone. Luckily I won the scholarship."

#### "I like to finish the race when there is a lot of stress and a lot of pressure. That's where I feel I perform the most"

Had it not been for a crash at Navarra that year, Gounon could today be a factory Porsche 963 racer. He'd adapted well to racing with a roof overhead and lay second in the points after eight rounds, ahead of fellow rookie Mathieu Jaminet, until two fractured vertebrae meant Jaminet was sent to the international scholarship in his place. Jaminet, now a fixture in the Penskerr.

Porsche IMSA roster, went on to win it and Gounon's career was on the rocks again. "There was no way to make a second year because Carrera Cup was too expensive, so I was back to

But a visit to the SRO's Balance of Performance tests at Paul Ricard in early 2016 changed his life. In the mistaken belief that he was talking to a truckie, Gounon struck up conversation with Callaway Competition team co-owner Ernst Wohr. After some >>>

working with my dad," he says. "And that time, it was really done."

of pressure regarding the fact that I could not continue," he recalls. "This today helps a lot when I am in a position to fight for a big race. That's why also I like to finish the race when there is a lot of stress and a lot of pressure. That's where I feel I perform the most, because I got used to that feeling when I was younger."

Gounon won in his second season in the French Rotax Cup in 2011, and claimed the IAME X30 karting title the following year. "That was again one of the objectives from my dad," he adds. "He said, 'Either you win this championship or we go home, because we will never find enough sponsors to make the step to single-seaters."

Twenty-five sponsors signed up for Gounon's first season of car racing, in French Formula 4 in 2013, many of them local companies from his Ardeche region, including the painter of his father's car dealership. He finished runner-up to Anthoine Hubert, but the



## LESSONS FORGED IN HIS FATHER'S IMAGE

Jean-Marc Gounon's beginning in racing was remarkable. Short on funds, he famously made his start in karting wearing gardening gloves, a borrowed motorcycle helmet, overalls from one of his father's workshop employees and kick-boxing shoes.

It was rather more conventional for his son Jules, who recalls his passion being triggered by watching Jean-Marc campaign an ORECA-run Audi at Le Mans in 2005, but his father's determination to get the most out of every mile was key in the young man's development.

"When you have no money, you are not doing any tests, the aim is to be the most efficient you can be as soon as you are in the car," explains Gounon Sr. "That is the first thing

I taught Jules. I said to him, 'As soon as you are sitting in a car, you are doing three kilometres in the car, one lap, you have to come back with information."

"I'M THANKFUL TO
MY DAD FOR THE
FIRE IN ME THAT
HELPS ME GO AND
HUNT BIG RACES"

Maximising those first few laps out of the pits on cold tyres was also an area of focus,

since Gounon Sr knew from experience that this is where the most time can be gained. The lessons had a significant impact on his son, who reckons Jean-Marc lit in him a frustration "that helped me throughout my career and still helps me now" as he watched other better-funded racers get extra test mileage. That jealousy has now been replaced by gratitude.

"I'm really thankful to my dad to bring me in that mode because it's something that keeps the fire in me and that really helps me to go and hunt big races," he declares. "I have a hunger to go and give the best all the time."

Gounon believes he's "a bit less aggressive" than his father on the track, but says they share the same determination: "My dad was somebody that never gave up when he was in a race car and I think that's something we really have in common."



time chewing the fat and admiring the new all-carbon Corvette C7 at Wohr's side, his father arrived and set him to rights, but Wohr was compelled to invite Gounon to a try-out at Hockenheim. Gounon was under no illusion that a race seat was in the offing and was prepared to treat it as "maybe the last time I drive a race car".

"I smashed into kerbs, I was over the limit everywhere," he reveals of his 10-lap outing. Unaware of the time he'd set, the first clue was the expression on his father's face. The second was an invitation to dinner, where Wohr and his partner Giovanni Ciccone agreed to run him in the first two races of the ADAC GT Masters campaign alongside Daniel Keilwitz.

After a patchy opening round at Oschersleben, Gounon and Keilwitz delivered a fairytale victory on Ciccone's 60th birthday at the Sachsenring — the race the French youngster had expected to be his last. Instead, the team decided to pay for the rest of his season, and he remained in with a chance of the title until a sickening final-race crash at Hockenheim left him hospitalised. When the team came to visit, the news was better than he ever could have imagined. Not only would he not have to pay for the damage, but he'd be retained for 2017: "They said, 'Next year

#### "You're just like, 'I'm not going to give up and if you want to pass me you're going to have to push me out'"

we're going to go and win the title'. And we did!"

That year was lift-off for Gounon as he earned money for the first time. Audi was suitably impressed when he finished second at Daytona — he'd been invited for a free drive with Callaway's GT Masters rival Land Motorsport — and awarded him a first paid factory contract for the Spa 24 Hours. There, the Sainteloc car he shared with Markus Winkelhock and Christopher Haase lost a lap when a wheel wasn't fastened properly before Gounon exited the pits, but they fought back for a remarkable win that made him a name in his own right: "To be respected as yourself is something that I was very proud of. Since a few years back, I think since Spa [2017], people have changed really their mind."

Combined with his successful GT Masters title tilt and some impressive Blancpain GT outings in ASP-run Mercedes fielded by his father's old rival Jerome Policand, it's unsurprising that Gounon had three factory offers for 2018. Bentley paid the best, he admits, but it also had the added appeal of a new car and two experienced team-mates in Guy Smith and Steven Kane he could learn from.

Unfortunately, the second-iteration Continental GT3's long wheelbase meant it struggled on twisty tracks and saved its best showings for faster venues. Victory in the 2019 Paul Ricard 1000km was his only GTWCE triumph in three years with Bentley, but the unquestionable high point was at Bathurst in 2020: Gounon survived a late puncture to begin his run of wins on the Mount Panorama circuit. "That year everything went our way," he reflects.

Gounon returned to ASP as a factory Mercedes driver in 2021, and by mid-season had found his groove with the AMG GT3. Two second places, plus a victory at Barcelona, meant he and Raffaele Marciello finished runner-up in the GTWCE standings, left to rue a broken damper while leading at Spa. But that was set to rights in a 2022 that featured a "crazy" run of success that also included the Bathurst and Kyalami IGTC rounds and four GT Masters wins, while Marciello and Gounon combined with Dani Juncadella to give ASP a long-awaited first Spa win and secure the GTWCE Endurance title. Without an electrical failure at Hockenheim, their advantage would have been much more comfortable.

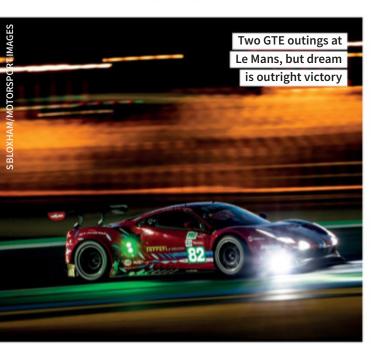
"The Merc is such a good all-round car," says Gounon, who believes he's a more confident driver than in his first stint with ASP in 2017. "It's good in the dry, it's good in the wet, it's good when it's cold, it's good when it's hot and I think that's what

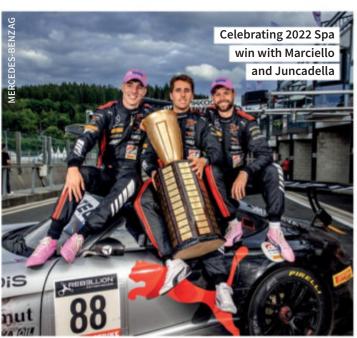














makes the car so successful. You have always a shot at a victory."

While he holds in high esteem the second Spa win, which put him on a par with compatriots Christophe Bouchut and Romain Dumas, and this year's long-awaited Daytona triumph on WeatherTech Racing co-driver Cooper MacNeil's swansong, Gounon picks his Bathurst hat-trick winner as "maybe one of the best of my career". Not least given it came alongside SunEnergy1 patron Kenny Habul and after being spun around in contact with fellow Mercedes man Maro Engel.

"It was such a nerve-racking last double stint for me," he reflects. "The first stint I pushed quali laps on quali laps and then we decided to undercut everyone and go with a second stint tyres against guys on new tyres. You feel like you are hunted by a lion and you are a very small squirrel running in front. You're just like, 'I'm not going

to give up and if you want to pass me you're going to have to push me out, and that's what happened! Luckily we won it..."

With two GTE Pro class outings at Le Mans under his belt, Gounon doesn't shy away from the fact that his "biggest dream" is to win the 24 Hours outright one day, something Mercedes is currently unable to offer him. But time is on his side, and he's signed a three-year contract extension that takes him through to the end of 2025. Considering where he was a few short years ago, Gounon recognises that he is today "exactly where I dreamed to be at".

"All those years of hard-trying, heart-breaking, and at that time I just didn't want to give up until someone says 'it's done, you cannot do anything, it's over," he smiles. "Today when I look back, I'm so glad that I never gave up." \*\*

# RACE CENTRE



# Checkmate as Evans roars for Jaguar

The New Zealander judged his winning move to perfection to score his — and his team's — first win of the season in a tactical slipstreaming sensation

#### STEFAN MACKLEY



t was just amazing to go toe to toe with these guys and try and outsmart each other, and we always said it's like playing chess out there." If the inaugural Sao Paulo E-Prix had indeed been the equivalent of a chess match, there's no doubt that Mitch Evans would have been granted the rank of Grandmaster, since the Kiwi judged his moves to perfection en route to victory — his and Jaguar's first of the season.

Seven official changes for the lead, among 144 overtaking moves in total, underlined the thrilling spectacle on Formula E's first visit to Brazil, which at times resembled a Formula Ford race such was the effect of the slipstream. The race also firmly signified Jaguar's emergence as a serious rival to Porsche in the championship battle, with the German manufacturer until now the class of the field. In all but one of the first five races of 2023 (with the exception of Jean-Eric Vergne's win in Hyderabad for DS Penske) the season had generally been dominated by Porsche, but the pecking order changed on the streets of Sao Paulo. Jaguar proved it has lost none of its bite, with all three podium finishers powered by the British marque.

If that result was unexpected ahead of the event, the nature of the race and the unfolding of the narrative went exactly the way many had predicted in the build-up. Talk ahead of the scheduled 31-lap race had centred around the unique layout of the circuit, which consisted of four notable straights, an uncommon sight for Formula E venues which—in the nine seasons of the championship—have generally been held on tight, twisty configurations more suited to the electric machines.

The layout, similar to the one used by IndyCar between 2010 and 2013, was always going to lend itself to a tactical slipstreaming battle, so it was something of a mixed blessing for Stoffel Vandoorne when the reigning Formula E champion took his maiden pole position of the



season and his first with DS Penske. The ex-McLaren F1 driver got the better of Antonio Felix da Costa in the qualifying final duel by just 0.063 seconds, with the Porsche driver continuing his impressive run of form after taking victory in the previous Cape Town race with a last-lap pass on Vergne. Evans, meanwhile, lined up third after losing out to the Portuguese in his qualifying semi-final duel.

A perfect launch ensured that Vandoorne held a comfortable lead through the opening sequence of corners, while da Costa was forced to defend from Evans into the right-hand Turn 1. The concertina effect through that section of bends had repercussions further

#### "At times it resembled a Formula Ford race such was the effect of the slipstream"

down the order, and Norman Nato went over the back of Jake Hughes's McLaren Nissan, launching the factory Nissan driver briefly into the air and removing his front wing. Edoardo Mortara also suffered the same fate but in less spectacular fashion when he seemingly clipped the rear of Evans's Jaguar and dropped out of fourth but, unlike Nato, the Maserati man eventually rejoined at the back.

For the early part of the running, the order remained unchanged as Vandoorne headed da Costa and Evans, with the Envision Jaguar of Nick Cassidy moving into fourth from fifth on the grid, while Vergne had made strides to run fifth after starting seventh.

Even by lap four da Costa's Porsche race engineer had given him the order to save energy behind Vandoorne and he duly remained in the slipstream, citing that the DS Penske"was a windbreaker for all of us". The Belgian tried to rectify the problem of leading by taking one minute of attack mode to concede the advantage on lap five, but just two tours later he was back at the head of the pack with a move into Turn 1.

Moments later the first of two safety periods was triggered when Sacha Fenestraz's Nissan came to a halt on the exit of Turn 6. Vandoorne was still leading, but by now Evans and Cassidy had passed da Costa. After the restart, the Porsche driver set about making up places, diving to the inside of Cassidy into Turn 4 and moving ahead of Evans into Turn 1 at the start of the following lap to once again occupy second.

Cassidy was the next to make progress, disposing of fellow Kiwi Evans into the Turn 4 chicane with a late lunge, before spectacularly sweeping past both da Costa and Vandoorne into Turn 1 at the start of the next lap. But Cassidy didn't want to lead either, and he immediately took one minute of attack mode and dropped to second.

Further back, huge ramifications had been set in motion concerning the title battle. Championship leader Pascal Wehrlein had started down in 18th after a sub-par qualifying performance, but the Porsche star's leading rival Jake Dennis failed to capitalise and put his Andretti Porsche 14th. Approaching the halfway point of the race, the pair were running nose to tail on the fringes of the top 10 when Dennis was



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hit from behind into Turn 1 by the NIO 333 of Dan Ticktum. The resulting contact caused significant damage, which became apparent moments later under braking for the right-hand hairpin of Turn 3. Dennis lost control and took avoiding action to the inside of Wehrlein ahead, but the two collided. While Wehrlein was able to continue despite "the whole floor missing on the right side", which "destroyed my rear tyres", Dennis was forced to stop due to the damage sustained in the collision with Ticktum and was left furious (see p41).

Dennis's stranded machine instigated the second safety car period. Cassidy had just moved back to the front, while da Costa had deposed Vandoorne into Turn 7 and was second. The DS Penske driver had begun a spiral down the order, his many laps at the head of the field having cost

#### "Vandoorne began a spiral down the order, his many laps at the head of the field having cost him"

him around 3% more energy than his rivals, despite "lifting crazy early everywhere" to not lead. Vandoorne event went so far as to suggest that there had been "some instances where it was quite dangerous", such were his efforts to lift and coast into the braking zones.

Following the end of the second safety car period, the leading quartet all activated their remaining attack modes over the following four laps, and once the order settled down Cassidy led from Evans, with da Costa holding a watching brief while Vandoorne had slipped down to fourth.

At the start of lap 25 came one of the race's pivotal moments, with da Costa losing any chance of victory by running wide at Turn 1 and needing to come to a complete stop before rejoining. The error dropped him from third to seventh and provided breathing space for the two Kiwis at the head of the field.

While the gap out front fluctuated to no more than 2s over the following laps, of more significance was the progress of Sam Bird. The Briton had qualified fifth, but was forced to start 10th due to serving a



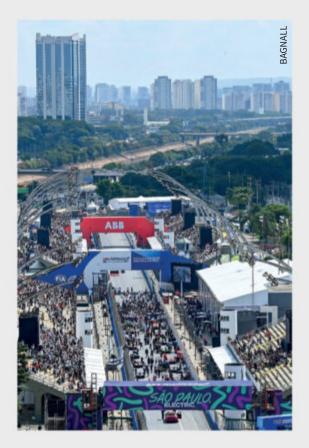
five-place grid penalty for a collision with Jaguar team-mate Evans in Hyderabad, and which he had been unable to serve last time out in Cape Town due to not taking the start in South Africa.

Bird had made steady progress in the early stages, moving into sixth at the expense of Hughes on lap five and, along with Vergne directly in front, had shadowed the leading quartet while saving energy. With da Costa's error he was promoted to fifth. Then he demoted Vergne into Turn 1 on lap 29 for fourth, and was soon up into third as Vandoorne continued to lose ground.

By now an extra four laps of racing had been declared due to the two safety car periods, and a near-2s gap between Evans and Bird began to quickly evaporate in the scorching heat. Seeing his teammate approaching fast in his mirrors, Evans made the pivotal move for the lead down the inside of Cassidy into the first corner on lap 32 of the eventual 35.

While the move would prove to be checkmate come the >>

#### ANOTHER STRONG ADDITION BUT IS STABILITY NOW NEEDED?



Despite Brazil's extensive motorsport history, which includes no fewer than eight Formula 1 world drivers' titles, it's taken almost a decade for Formula E to break into the country.

The inaugural Sao Paulo E-Prix last Saturday had been a long time coming for the championship organisers, and the 1.82-mile, 11-turn circuit with its long straights and heavy braking zones provided the perfect spectacle.

It may have taken nine years for the circuit to be added to the calendar – Rio de Janeiro was initially slated for the opening season – but the race is here to stay after signing a five-year deal.

"Brazil was particularly bad in terms of how people in general saw Formula E because there was a lot of trouble with broadcasting," said home hero Lucas di Grassi. "There was a lot of trouble [because] we didn't have a race here, even with big names like Felipe Massa, [Bruno] Senna, [Nelson] Piquet Jr and myself racing. We still didn't manage to break through into the Brazilian market, and I think now this race, the timing, the maturity of the market is going to be very good."

The circuit became the third new venue on the bounce that Formula E has visited this year, following the races in Hyderabad (India) and Cape Town (South Africa), with a new venue in Portland (USA) also scheduled for June.

While the new locations were generally well received by drivers and fans, NIO 333 driver Sergio Sette Camara believes that Formula E needs to remain loyal to venues in order to build up a following in the local areas. "That's one of the big added benefits for me, probably the amount of places we visit and we race," said the Brazilian, who finished his home race in 16th. "I think some consistency in the rounds would be good, just to create some fidelity of the public. It's good to go to new places, but once we find our places in the world, let's say as a championship, I hope we remain relatively stable just to create a tradition."



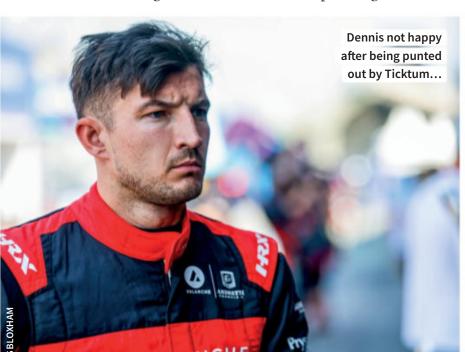
chequered flag, a thrilling lead battle ran until the very end. Cassidy and Bird shadowed Evans over the remaining three laps, and a move for the lead was always going to come down to the final tour. Sure enough, Cassidy looked for a gap on the run to the Turn 4 chicane, forcing Evans to defend to the inside, while the same situation occurred on the run down to the 90-degree right of Turn 7.

Incredibly, Cassidy then tried to the outside again in the penultimate corner, pulling completely alongside Evans into the left turn. With the inside line, Evans held his ground and moved to defend the inside of the final right-hand bend, and the top three were covered by just over half a second at the chequered flag.

"It's come at a really good time — we couldn't leave it much later in the season because we've lost a lot of ground [in the championship]," said Evans of his first win since Seoul in August last year. "The qualifying has been good, the pace has been good, the race pace has been solid, but for different reasons we've not been able to convert it into a good result. We knew this race was going to be tough from a strategy point of view, but I think we timed it to perfection. Obviously having three Jaguar powertrains on the podium is a special moment for the team."

While Cassidy recorded his third podium on the trot, for Bird it was a case of what might have been. The Briton had more energy in reserve than his rivals in front, but conceded after his collision in Hyderabad"there was absolutely no point sticking my nose somewhere where it could have really affected team Jaguar's points".

Da Costa was 3.5s behind the victor in fourth, left to rue his mistake at Turn 1 after recovering back ahead of DS Penske pair Vergne and



#### "Obviously having three Jaguar powertrains on the podium is a special moment for the team"

Vandoorne in the final laps. Incredibly, despite suffering damage in his collision with Dennis, Wehrlein was able to finish seventh, and had even been running in fourth prior to activating the first of his two mandatory attack modes. Not only had the German reached the end with a damaged car, but Dennis's retirement meant he increased his lead at the top of the standings to 24 points, something that had looked unlikely after qualifying.

Despite his collision with Nato on the opening lap, Hughes was able to finish seventh, just ahead of McLaren team-mate Rene Rast as the duo avoided the chaos that unfolded around them. Remarkably, Envision's Sebastien Buemi completed the top 10 after pitting for a new front wing and suffering hand injuries in an earlier collision (see right).

The result leaves Evans 47 points behind Wehrlein at the top of the standings, but with the confidence that Jaguar appears to have at last caught up with its German rival, after winning the race no one wanted to lead. "It was a really tricky race to manage for the team, they guided me through it really well in terms of trying to pick our moment to lead or drop behind," he enthused. "It was quite extreme in terms of trying sometimes to not lead a race — which is completely bizarre!" \*\*



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#### IN THE HEADLINES

#### **DENNIS DECRIES 'PLONKER'...**

Formula E title challenger Jake Dennis branded fellow Briton Dan Ticktum a "plonker" after the pair collided, resulting in the Andretti Porsche driver's retirement. "Two races now just driving my own race and then some plonker 100 metres behind me forgets to brake and smashes into me," said Dennis. "It's typical, I don't know what else I can do. I don't know what he was thinking. I've seen the onboard and it's like he's in his own little world. I'm pretty annoyed with Dan."

#### ...AS TICKTUM TAKES BLAME

NIO 333 driver Ticktum later accepted responsibility for the collision with Dennis. "It just didn't stop," he said after finishing 17th. "This concrete surface which was laid before the race weekend – when there's a bit of rubber on it, it's OK, but if you're offline... I've never known anything like that in my whole racing career, it just did not stop. Of course, if I see him [Dennis] I'll apologise, because obviously I didn't mean to do it at all."

#### **BUEMI SUFFERS HAND INJURIES**

Envision's Sebastien Buemi suffered "bad bruising and swelling" to both hands after colliding with the Maserati MSG of Maximilian Guenther on the second lap of the race. Buemi hit the back of the German into the Turn 4 chicane and needed to pit for a new front wing. Despite the unscheduled stop and his injuries, the 2015-16 Formula E champion was able to recover and finished a remarkable 10th.

#### **FRIJNS MAKES RETURN**

Robin Frijns (below) made his first Formula E start since breaking his wrist in the opening round of the season in Mexico City. The Abt Mahindra driver, who has a metal plate fitted to his left wrist, qualified 20th before finishing the race in 14th. "It's just a bit in the beginning stiffness, but the more you drive the looser it gets," he said.





RESULTS ROUND 5/11, SAO PAULO (BRA), 25 MARCH (35 LAPS – 65.429 MILES)					
POS	DRIVER	TEAM/CAR	TIME		
1	Mitch Evans (NZL)	JaguarRacing/JaguarI-Type6	53m25.536s		
2	Nick Cassidy (NZL)	Envision Racing / Jaguar I-Type 6	+0.284s		
3	Sam Bird (GBR)	Jaguar Racing / Jaguar I-Type 6	+0.507s		
4	Antonio Felix da Costa (PRT)	Porsche / Porsche 99X Electric Gen3	+3.487s		
5	Jean-Eric Vergne (FRA)	DS Penske / DS E-Tense FE23	+4.042s		
6	Stoffel Vandoorne (BEL)	DS Penske / DS E-Tense FE23	+4.576s		
7	Pascal Wehrlein (DEU)	Porsche / Porsche 99X Electric Gen3	+5.659s		
8	Jake Hughes (GBR)	McLaren / Nissan e-4ORCE 04	+6.141s		
9	Rene Rast (DEU)	McLaren / Nissan e-4ORCE 04	+7.403s		
10	Sebastien Buemi (CHE)	Envision Racing / Jaguar I-Type 6	+7.976s		
11	Maximilian Gunther (DEU)	Maserati / Maserati Tipo Folgore	+15.192s		
12	Andre Lotterer (DEU)	Andretti / Porsche 99X Electric Gen3	+15.345s		
13	Lucas di Grassi (BRA)	Mahindra Racing / Mahindra M9Electro	+19.247s		
14	Robin Frijns (NLD)	Abt/Mahindra M9Electro	+20.751s		
15	Oliver Rowland (GBR)	Mahindra Racing / Mahindra M9Electro	+21.465s		
16	Sergio Sette Camara (BRA)	NIO 333 / NIO 333 ER9	+31.514s		
17	Dan Ticktum (GBR)	NIO 333 / NIO 333 ER9	+34.398s		
R	Nico Muller (CHE)	Abt/Mahindra M9Electro	19 laps-accident		
R	Edoardo Mortara (CHE)	Maserati / Maserati Tipo Folgore	19 laps-accident		
R	Jake Dennis (GBR)	Andretti / Porsche 99X Electric Gen3	13 laps-accident		
R	Sacha Fenestraz (FRA)	Nissan / Nissan e-40RCE 04	6 laps		
R	Norman Nato (FRA)	Nissan / Nissan e-40RCE 04	0 laps-accident damage		

 $\textbf{Winner's average speed } 73.479 mph. \textbf{\textit{Fastest lap Bird}} \ 1 m13.684 s, 89.041 mph.$ 

#### QUALIFYING

1 Vandoorne 1m11.904s; 2 da Costa 1m11.967s; 3 Evans 1m12.022s; 4 Mortara 1m12.109s; 5 Cassidy 1m12.150s; 6 Hughes 1m12.657s; 7 Vergne 1m13.157s; 8 Nato 1m12.971s; 9 Gunther 1m12.189s\*; 10 Bird 1m12.037s\*; 11 Rast 1m13.161s; 12 Buemi 1m12.971s; 13 Muller 1m13.200s; 14 Dennis 1m12.991s;

15 **Fenestraz** 1m13.040s; 16 **Sette Camara** 1m13.307s; 17 **Ticktum** 1m13.045s; 18 **Wehrlein** 1m13.280s\*; 19 **Rowland** 1m13.330s; 20 **Frijns** 1m13.671s; 21 **Lotterer** 1m13.382s; 22 **di Grassi** 1m24.491s. \*= grid penalty.

#### CHAMPIONSHIP

**1** Wehrlein **86**; 2 Dennis **62**; 3 Cassidy **61**; 4 Vergne **60**; 5 da Costa **58**; **6** Bird **44**; 7 Buemi **42**; 8 Rast **40**; 9 Evans **39**; 10 Hughes **32**.







# New team on top in Tuscan challenge

24H SERIES MUGELLO 12 HOURS (ITA) 25-26 MARCH ROUND 3/8

The new Belgian-run, Antiguan-flagged Haas RT team took its maiden victory at its third attempt after its Audi R8 LMS GT3 Evo II sped through the Tuscany countryside with a driver line-up led by Frederic Vervisch.

With the race split into two six-hour parts, one held on Saturday and the other on Sunday, Vervisch and his co-drivers Mathieu Detry and Stephane Perrin were already ahead when the action was paused overnight. The only other car on the same lap at this point was the Sainteloc Racing Audi of Erwan Bastard and Paul Evrard — with the rest at least two laps adrift — and indeed it was this pair that fought it out to the finish on Sunday.

Sainteloc's reigning European and French GT4 champion Bastard plus Evrard tried to take it to the Haas trio, but their bid was hampered by twice being unfortunate enough to pit moments before a field-slowing Code 60 was called, and they eventually finished two laps adrift of Vervisch and his crew.



Up into third came the Heart of Racing Mercedes-AMG GT3, run in conjunction with SPS Automotive Performance, in the hands of reigning IMSA GTD title holder Roman De Angelis, American-based Brit Ian James and young American Gray Newell. They recovered from a visit to the gravel from Newell on Saturday, not to mention his mistakenly staying on board for a double stint due to a radio problem!

Audi GT3 talisman Christopher Mies led most of the opening hour of the race in his Land Motorsport R8, but a water leak was discovered overnight and a camshaft problem caused further delay.

#### **24H SERIES**

#### MUGELLO 12 HOURS (ITA)

Frederic Vervisch/Mathieu Detry/ Stephane Perrin Haas RT (Audi R8 LMS GT3 Evo II)

#### **NASCAR CUP**

#### **AUSTIN (USA)**

Tyler Reddick 23XI Racing (Toyota Camry)



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#### Reddick is allegro at Austin after overtime

NASCAR CUP AUSTIN (USA) 26 MARCH ROUND 6/36

Once again a NASCAR Cup driver impressed on his way to victory, but Tyler Reddick's win at Circuit of The Americas was anything but easy.

Reddick (who led 41 laps) and William Byron (in front for 28) spent much of the race trading the lead, and Reddick moved out front for the final time on lap 64 of what was originally scheduled as a 68-lap race. But he then had to fight off repeated challengers in three two-lap overtimes.

On the final restart, Kyle Busch got into Alex Bowman entering Turn 1, which allowed the 23XI Racing Toyota of Reddick to clear the field for the lead. This time, he made it to the white flag without any further incidents on the track and cruised to a 1.411-second win over Busch. It's his fourth career victory, three of which

have come on road courses.

The win continued a remarkable turnaround for Reddick, who began the season wrecking out of the first two races. "It means the world," he beamed. "This whole 23XI team has been working so hard all winter long to make the road course programme better."

Behind second-placed Busch's Richard Childress Racing Chevrolet, it was Alex Bowman (Hendrick Chevy) and Ross Chastain (Trackhouse Chevy), while Hendrick driver Byron wound up fifth.

Among the impressive field of road course 'ringers' who participated in Sunday's race, ex-Formula 1 champion Jenson Button, driving a Stewart-Haasprepared Rick Ware Racing Ford, had the best finish of 18th. Sportscar star Jordan Taylor, substituting for the injured Chase Elliott at Hendrick, was 24th. Another F1 champion, Kimi Raikkonen, received a penalty for short-cutting the track on the final lap and ended up 29th in his Trackhouse Chevy.

JIM UTTER





#### MOTOGP ALGARVE (PRT) 26 MARCH ROUND 1/21

MotoGP's new-for-2023 weekend format, including sprint races, has highlighted a number of problems. The 12-lap Saturday sprint in Portugal led to what many felt was "a jungle", with aggression levels high. The more pressurised layout of the weekend also took its toll, with Tech3's Pol Espargaro hospitalised with multiple fractures in a practice crash after pushing to ensure a place in the qualifying pole shootout session for Saturday, and Ducati's Enea Bastianini suffering a broken shoulder in a sprint race crash.

But perhaps the biggest problem revealed at the Portuguese Grand Prix was the form of Ducati. Reigning world champion Francesco Bagnaia enjoyed what he described as the "perfect" weekend, as he scored victory in the first-ever sprint race and repeated the feat in the Portuguese Grand Prix to extract a maximum haul of 37 points.

Neither march to victory was particularly easy for Bagnaia. In the sprint, he was forced to battle with ex-Ducati team-mate Jack Miller — now at KTM — and the Pramac Ducati of Jorge Martin. A mistake from Martin on the final lap gave Bagnaia the opportunity to ease into a decisive lead.

In the main race, Bagnaia was third after the chaos of the first few corners, after getting pinched between poleman Marc Marquez and Martin off the line. But as home hero Miguel Oliveira enjoyed a brief stint in the lead on his RNF Aprilia, Bagnaia quickly dispatched Martin into Turn 1 on lap two. Twelve corners later, Oliveira succumbed to the Ducati rider's advances.

Marquez controversially locked up under braking for Turn 3 next time around and wiped out Oliveira. The incident also forced Martin off track and caused him to break his toe. It gifted Bagnaia a lead of a second over the Aprilia of Maverick Vinales.

Vinales, fully settled at Aprilia, was quick to erode Bagnaia's lead and mount pressure on him. The Ducati rider's title campaign last year was plagued by numerous errors that contributed to his five retirements, so this race was far from done.

Both Bagnaia and Vinales had the measure of the rest of the field, and the gap between the pair hovered between 0.104s and 0.2s from laps six to 12 of the 25. Bagnaia began to stretch his legs on lap 14 as the gap opened up to 0.796s, and would go over a second two tours later.

While a late charge from Vinales over the final few laps appeared to be nothing more than Bagnaia stage-managing his race, the champion later admitted he was "in a bit of trouble" with his fading rear Michelin tyre. This would have been a situation in 2022 that could have unstuck the Italian, but there were no such dramas and he led Vinales by 0.687s to complete the double.

Third went to VR46 Ducati rider Marco Bezzecchi, while a fight for fourth was won by Pramac's Johann Zarco from Gresini's Alex Marquez and the KTMs of Brad Binder and Miller to show that the Austrian make's pre-season form was not as bad as feared.

The opposite was true of 2021 champion Fabio Quartararo. Launch control issues









thwarted his sprint race and left him in 10th, while a badly judged line off the start in the GP left him needing to recover from 15th at the end of lap one. He took the chequred flag in eighth, but the Yamaha's old woes of a lack of straightline speed and struggles to overtake were ever-present.

Aleix Espargaro was ninth on the second Aprilia as he rued a bad qualifying, while Alex Rins was the top Honda rider in the main race in 10th to show how much work is needed at LCR.

Marquez drew intense jeering from the partisan crowd for his Oliveira calamity. He also copped a double long-lap penalty from the stewards for this weekend's Argentinian GP, although he won't be competing there due to a suspected fracture in his right hand (see *Pit & Paddock*).

As the first round of MotoGP's new era created numerous talking points and controversies (some of which are in need of urgent resolution), Ducati and Bagnaia have thrown down a gauntlet that looks at this stage as if it will be difficult, but not impossible, to pick up. But their challengers have got their work cut out.

LEWIS DUNCAN

ARGENTINIAN GP 6 APRIL ISSUE

F	RESU	ILTS ROUND 1/21, AL	GARVE (PRT), 26	MARCH (25 LAPS -	7
_	POS	RIDER	TEAM	TIME	
	1	Francesco Bagnaia (ITA)	Ducati	41m25.401s	
	2	MaverickVinales (ESP)	Aprilia	+0.687s	
	3	Marco Bezzecchi (ITA)	VR46 Ducati	+2.726s	
	4	Johann Zarco (FRA)	Pramac Ducati	+8.060s	
	5	Alex Marquez (ESP)	Gresini Ducati	+8.125s	
	6	Brad Binder (ZAF)	KTM	+8.247s	
	7	Jack Miller (AUS)	KTM	+8.381s	
	8	Fabio Quartararo (FRA)	Yamaha	+8.543s	
	9	Aleix Espargaro (ESP)	Aprilia	+9.294s	
	10	Alex Rins (ESP)	LCR Honda	+11.591s	
	11	Joan Mir (ESP)	Honda	+16.992s	
	12	Takaaki Nakagami (JPN)	LCR Honda	+17.448s	
	13	Augusto Fernandez (ESP)	GasGas Tech3 KTM	+21.723s	
	14	Franco Morbidelli (ITA)	Yamaha	+27.050s	
	R	Raul Fernandez (ESP)	Aprilia RNF	23 laps-accident	
	R	Luca Marini (ITA)	VR46 Ducati	21 laps-accident	
	R	Jorge Martin (ESP)	Pramac Ducati	19 laps-accident	
	R	Fabio Di Giannantonio (ITA)	Gresini Ducati	10 laps-retired in pits	
	R	Miguel Oliveira (PRT)	Aprilia RNF	2 laps-accident	
	R	Marc Marquez (ESP)	Honda	2 laps-accident	
	NS	Enea Bastianini (ITA)	Ducati	sprintaccident	
	NS	Pol Espargaro (ESP)	GasGas Tech3 KTM	practice accident	

WEEKEND WINNERS

#### MOTO2

71.333 MILES)

**ALGARVE (PRT)** 

Pedro Acosta AJ Motorsport (Kalex)

#### **MOTO3**

ALGARVE (PRT)

Daniel Holgado (below)
Tech3 (KTM)



Winner's average speed 103.323mph. Fastest lap A Espargaro 1m38.872s, 103.892mph.

**QUALIFYING 21** M Marquez 1m37.226s; 2 Bagnaia 1m37.290s; 3 Martin 1m37.454s; 4 Oliveira 1m37.521s; 5 Miller 1m37.549s; 6 Bastianini 1m37.584s; 7 Vinales 1m37.598s; 8 Bezzecchi 1m37.616s; 9 Marini 1m37.622s; 10 Zarco 1m37.880s; 11 Quartararo 1m37.920s; 12 A Espargaro 1m38.136s.

QUALIFYING 1 M Marquez 1m37.675s; Oliveira 1m37.849s; 13 A Marquez 1m37.970s; 14 Mir 1m38.064s; 15 Binder 1m38.105s; 16 Rins 1m38.133s; 17 Morbidelli 1m38.335s; 18 Nakagami 1m38.439s; 19 A Fernandez 1m38.464s; 20 R Fernandez 1m38.492s; 21 Di Giannantonio 1m38.778s.

#### **SPRINT RACE** (12 LAPS – 34.240 MILES)

1 Bagnaia 19m52.862s; 2 Martin + 0.307s; 3 M Marquez + 1.517s; 4 Miller + 1.603s; 5 Vinales + 1.854s; 6 A Espargaro + 2.106s; 7 Oliveira + 2.940s; 8 Zarco + 5.595s; 9 A Marquez + 5.711s; 10 Quartararo + 5.924s; 11 R Fernandez + 8.160s; 12 Binder + 8.384s; 13 Rins + 11.288s; 14 Morbidelli + 17.138s; 15 Nakagami + 18.128s; 16 Di Giannantonio + 21.235s; R Bezzecchi 2 laps; R Bastianini 1 lap; R Marini 1 lap; R Mir 0 laps; R A Fernandez 0 laps. Winner's average speed 103.334mph. Fastest lap Miller 1 m 38.539s, 104.243mph.

RIDERS' CHAMPIONSHIP 1 Bagnaia 37; 2 Vinales 25; 3 Bezzecchi 16; 4 Zarco 15; 5 Miller 15; 6 A Marquez 12; 7 A Espargaro 11; 8 Binder 10; 9 Martin 9; 10 Quartararo 8.

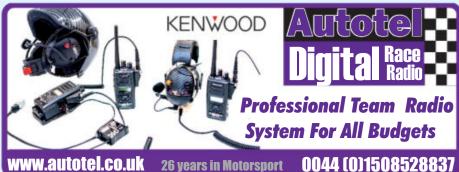
MANUFACTURERS' CHAMPIONSHIP 1 Ducati 37; 2 Aprilia 25; 3 KTM 16; 4 Honda 13; 5 Yamaha 8.



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#### motorsport JOBS



#### MOTORSPORT PROJECT MANAGER Kingdom Creative

#### The Role

- The role will include managing a selection of existing motorsport clients and enjoying regular discussions with them to identify and plan upcoming filming projects.
- Our Production Team and our Creative Team work as one united force to prepare film ideas to present to clients, so we will need both your project management skills and your imagination. The Production Team then manage projects throughout development, pre-production and the post-production stages, ensuring that the client's experience is to the highest possible standard.

#### Your role will include:

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- Liaising with clients to establish a brief, budget and timeline for new projects.
- Working with the Creative Team to develop film ideas.
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- Working on-set with the Director and the crew to run efficient shoot days.
- · Working with the Director and the Editor to bring the films to life.
- Managing client comments and changes to films with the Post-Production Manager and Editor.
- Ensuring a high level of customer service is provided to our clients.
- Managing and reconciling budgets for every project.
- Monitoring hours and billing the client accordingly.
- Experiencing a sense of achievement when listening to the excited words of clients when they watch their films for the first time.

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**III**mpa

#### CONTENT COORDINATOR MPA Creative

#### About the job

We are looking for an enthusiastic and dedicated Content Coordinator to join our growing PR and communications team at MPA, working with renowned clients across world motorsport.

#### Responsibilities

- In this role at MPA you will be responsible for supporting the delivery of communications and content plans for our clients. Alongside excellent organisational skills you will build and manage the content calendar, working closely with all accounts and stakeholders to develop a clear workflow and guidelines for their channels, as well as MPA's platforms.
- As part of the role, you will work together with the Creative team to liaise directly with clients to maximise the quality and quantity of their content output across multiple channels.
- A passion for sport, particularly motorsport, content creation, and an understanding of digital and social media platforms, as well as the execution of campaigns across such channels, is essential.
- An ability to keep up to date with the ongoings of the motorsport community is pivotal, alongside knowledge of the key social performance metrics and how they are to be evaluated.
- We are looking for a minimum of two years' previous experience in a relevant PR or communications role. Depending on client demands, the role will require weekend working and overseas travel
- You must already have the appropriate visas to live and work in the UK, and the ability to travel and work abroad for events is also essential.

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#### VEHICLE SYSTEMS ENGINEER Palmersport

Bedford Autodrome, the home of PalmerSport - the leading operator of prestige corporate motorsport events and the UK's top single seater race series GB3 & GB4 championships - is seeking a Vehicle Systems Engineer to install and maintain all major electronic, electro-mechanical and electrical equipment on our both the GB3 & 4 race cars plus our performance engineered Palmersport fleet.

This new and exciting position requires an individual with sound knowledge of motorsport electronic and electrical components ideally within the race/high-performance automotive sector, who has the enthusiasm and passion to work within our industry.

#### **Duties will include:**

- Setting up and maintaining an inventory of all major electronic and electrical equipment on vehicles (ECU's, Dash Displays, gear shift systems ABS etc), leading to appropriate service and maintenance schedules
- Assembling electronic and electrical components on high performance & race vehicles as well as any trackside equipment with which it interfaces
- Implementing and managing routine reliability and test procedures for both our GB3 & 4 and Palmersport performance vehicles
- Being responsible for the development, planning & integration of electronic and electrical components within our race & performance vehicles
- Joining the early stages of developments / projects for vehicle and circuit-based systems with a view to ensuring that electronic, electrical and comms considerations are addressed, and then to plan for their timely execution within budgets
- Liaising with sub-contractors and suppliers from the beginning of projects to ensure that the company's best interests are met and supply is timely

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SEABIRD

#### RACEBIRD ASSEMBLY TECHNICIAN Seabird Technologies

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- Building state of the art foiling racing boats to the highest standards.
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- Be prepared to work in Italy for periods of up to 2 weeks (14 days) per month.
- Have proficient knowledge of Microsoft Word and Excel.
- Knowledge of Italian is an advantage though not critical.
- Have a good level of fabrication skills and carbon repair/ modification knowledge.

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#### SYSTEMS TECHNICIAN WAE

#### Role Purpose:

#### Primary function:

 Support the building and servicing of electrical wiring harnesses and sensors using System 25, Autosport connectors and fine gauge wiring.

#### Secondary function:

 Support the development of off car equipment to aid in the efficient and fast operation of our vehicles Preparation and supporting running of cars at test and race events as required

#### **Key Skills:**

- (It is not necessary to have experience in all these areas)
- Building of electrical wiring harnesses
- Termination of sensors
- Calibration, testing and quality assurance of sensors and assemblies
- Fault diagnosis and reporting
- Maintain documentation relating to harness and sensor installations
- An understanding of interacting with a Rest API based architecture.
- Support testing of car systems using System Monitor
- Data analysis using ATLAS

#### Experience & Qualifications:

- Proficiency in all Microsoft Office programs
- Self-motivation and the ability to complete tasks with minimal guidance, and to work under pressure to meet critical deadlines
- A creative and proactive approach to problem-solving, along with good attention to detail
- Flexible attitude to working hours
- To follow and actively enforce the company's health and Safety and HV policies

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#### GRADUATE QUALITY ENGINEER Xtrac Ltd

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- Investigating product and process issues, establishing the root cause of problems using a structured methodology, and reporting your findings.
- Engaging with our suppliers and forming strong working relationships, working to establish a clear understanding of Xtrac requirements, and how to follow them.
- Carrying out audits within Xtrac and at our supplier's premises, to ISO and IATF industry standards.
- Providing technical support to our manufacturing teams, engineers, and customers.
- We're looking for someone with the following skills, attributes and attitude to join our team;
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- Driven by results, committed to the task through to completion, and proud of being able to show your achievements.
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# Morris, Hart and O'Brien join GT Cup

**GT CUP** 

British GT title winner Seb Morris, TCR UK ace Max Hart and reigning champion Michael O'Brien are among the successful racers to announce late deals to compete in this season's GT Cup, which begins at Donington Park this weekend.

Morris, who took the British GT crown in 2017 and contested a partial season of Porsche Carrera Cup GB last year after Bentley's factory GT programme came to an end, is now due to share a RAM Racing-run Mercedes-AMG GT4 with Am Charles Dawson — who has aspirations of progressing to GT3 competition.

"I really am looking forward to my first experience of GT Cup and I want to express my gratitude to Charles for reaching out with this great opportunity," said Morris. "Obviously the GT4 car will be a little different to get used to from GT3, but I'm buzzing to be back on track this season with a fresh challenge."

Meanwhile, Hart will make the move to GT racing this year as he joins Mark Havers in a T4 Motorsport McLaren 570S GT4. Hart won multiple races in a three-year spell in TCR UK and previously raced in Irish Formula Vee, Monoposto and South-East Asian Formula 4. He will also make outings in the TCR class of the British Endurance Championship this year.

"I've got a lot of rear-wheel-drive experience from single-seaters but this is my first time racing GT cars," said Hart. "[The McLaren] is a really easy car to drive but difficult enough to drive on the limit so it's a really Pro and Am-friendly car. The GT world is huge so it can open so



many doors for me, which is the goal."

O'Brien is also due to contest selected rounds of the championship, after winning the overall title alongside Simon Orange last year. O'Brien will continue to drive for the Orange Racing by JMH squad but will this time be paired with racing rookie Melly Zhang. "I've been working with Melly from the beginning as a mentor, advisor and coach," explained O'Brien. "She's developing really well and picking everything up very quickly so we're excited for the season ahead!"

Another champion on the grid this year will be Praga Cup UK conqueror Gordie Mutch, and he is due to share a Paddock Motorsport GT4 McLaren with Tim Docker, who missed part of last season after a testing accident. "I'm very excited to take on a new challenge in GT Cup this year, to have the opportunity to build another strong Pro-Am partnership, and to fight for the GTH title," said Mutch.

MARK PAULSON & STEPHEN LICKORISH

#### TOFTS TO BRING DUCKHAMS BACK TO FF1600

#### **UNITED FORMULA FORD**

The famous Duckhams livery will return to Formula Ford this season with rookie Jacob Tofts, son of Zetec Brands Hatch Festival winner Neil Tofts.

Tofts Jr, a multiple Esports champion, will make his debut in MotorSport Vision's United Formula Ford Championship at Donington Park this weekend in a Souley Motorsport Medina JL17. He has previously won the Porsche Club Great Britain Sim Racing Championship and online Creventic GT4 Endurance Series.

Duckhams, which supplies engine oils, lubricants and additives, sponsored the works Van Diemen team throughout the 1980s and 1990s, scoring multiple Formula Ford titles and Brands Festival victories. Future stars Eddie Irvine, Jan Magnussen and Mark Webber (below) were among those to enjoy success with the blueand-yellow colour scheme.

"One of my earliest childhood memories is of watching recordings of Formula Ford races with the blue-and-yellow Duckhams cars at the front, so to now be chosen to lead Duckhams back into the highest level of Formula Ford racing really is a great honour," said the 19-year-old.

"Having never raced karts, the transition from sim to track is admittedly not the traditional route, but I'm hopeful that my experience will translate quickly to real-world racing. My aim is to be at the front fighting for wins as soon as possible."

Mygale racer Tofts Sr won the Zetec class at the Formula Ford Festival three times, in 2008-09 and 2011.

**KEVIN TURNER** 



#### DE HAAN JOINS RICHARDSON FOR DUAL CAMPAIGN

#### **PORSCHE**

Porsche Sprint Challenge Southern Europe champion Robert de Haan will contest a dual Carrera Cup campaign with Richardson Racing this year as the team makes a fulltime expansion into Europe.

Former Ginetta Junior racer de Haan, who competed in Spanish Formula 4 last season, dominated the Porsche winter series, winning four of the six races. After that success, he will again race with his former Ginetta outfit in both Carrera Cup GB and the Benelux series as team-mate to Micah Stanley — who was 11th in last year's GB standings.

"We have big plans for the coming seasons to establish ourselves on the international stage, and the decision to enter the Benelux series alongside Carrera Cup GB is the next step towards that," said team manager Andrew Richardson.

Meanwhile, Carrera Cup GB race winner Theo Edgerton will move from JTR to Redline Racing for his second campaign in the series after winning the Sprint Challenge GB title in 2021.



#### Robinson takes podiums in Swallows' latest Jaguar creation

#### **CTCRC**

Jaguar specialist Swallows Racing debuted its newly built XK in the Classic Touring Car Racing Club's Jaguar Challenge at Silverstone last weekend, with Jack Robinson qualifying fastest before claiming two podium finishes.

The XK has been built from a Japanese shell over the winter by a team led by Robinson's father Gary and elder brother Tom, who won last year's title in the outfit's self-developed supercharged XJR6 saloon. It incorporates lessons learned from the XJR6, with attention focused on chassis development to optimise weight distribution and handling. To achieve this,

the XK's transmission tunnel has been refabricated to allow the gearbox — a six-speed unit from the diesel S-type — and driver to be moved rearwards.

Further bespoke fabrication includes the exhaust, solid aluminium bushes and 3D-printed components. The car employs a fly-by-wire throttle and electric power steering but is powered by a standard 4.2-litre V8 so it fits the championship's class for lightly modified machinery.

"It's completely different to the XJ40 I drove last year," said sophomore Robinson, "so it keeps me on my toes. Because it's a new car still, we've got a few bits to play around with, seeing how the car reacts."

MARK PAULSON

### Century and Xentek enter Sprint Challenge

#### **PORSCHE**

Century Motorsport and Xentek Motorsport are the latest successful teams to reveal entries for the Porsche Sprint Challenge GB this year, when it joins the British Touring Car support bill on a full-time basis.

Century will field Motorbase young driver Will Jenkins — who narrowly missed out on last season's Ginetta GT5 Challenge title — in the Cayman category, having first moved into Porsche racing in 2022.

"This is a fantastic opportunity for me to race in a top GT championship and compete full-time on the prestigious BTCC support package again," said Jenkins. "I'm not underestimating the challenge ahead of us but, after just missing out on title success last year, I want to go one better this time around."

Successful GT5 squad Xentek, meanwhile, will make its first Porsche foray



with Ginetta GT Academy graduate Danny Dwyer. "We have big ambitions to grow the GT team in the next few years and this move into the Porsche Sprint Challenge GB is an exciting first step on that journey for us with a

new manufacturer and new championship," said team boss Christopher Richards.

Jenkins and Dwyer are among an 18-driver entry list revealed for the Sprint Challenge, two-thirds of which are new to the series.



#### **PORSCHES READY TO GO**

Porsche Club Motorsport ran a well-attended test and press event at Donington Park last week, its club championship having attracted its biggest field to date of Class 1 and Class 2 cars. It will also run its Boxster Cup division and an Open category for GT3 and older GT models. The season begins at Donington this weekend.

Photograph by Gary Hawkins

### White plans racing comeback after serious Thruxton crash

#### **GINETTA GT**

Ginetta racing stalwart Colin White is due to return to competition in the manufacturer's new GT Championship seven months after suffering serious leg injuries in a high-speed crash at Thruxton.

White tangled with Mike Brown on the run up Woodham Hill in the Ginetta GT4 Supercup last August and has since been recuperating. The former Hot Rods and ASCAR star now plans to make a comeback in the opening Ginetta GT round at Oulton Park next weekend, providing he passes a final check with his doctor after Autosport went to press.

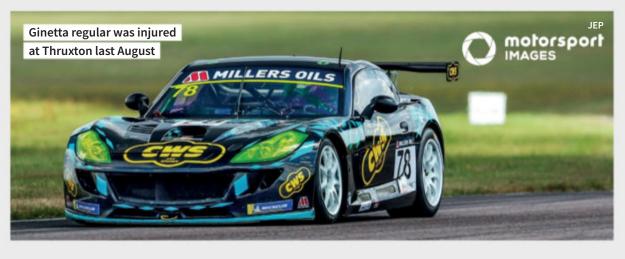
"I'm going to see my specialist on Wednesday [yesterday] and he will give me the final tick in the box," explained White, who was full of praise for those who have helped with his recovery. "The hospital did a marvellous job of rebuilding the leg. I'm going to do it slowly so I'm not going to go crazy with testing, making sure I don't overdo the leg.

"I tested the Ginetta last weekend and I'm looking forward to [racing] it. The car was really nice and I was OK health-wise."

White admits there was a mental challenge to overcome getting back into a "similar car with the same steering wheel" as the G56 he had his accident in but, as his recovery progressed, he knew he wanted to return to Ginetta action.

"Ginetta has always looked after me and I've been with them a long time," added White, who might tackle enduros later this year. "They wanted to do something new and I want to support them."

STEPHEN LICKORISH



#### IN THE HEADLINES

#### **NEW BRDC RISING STARS**

A raft of drivers have been chosen to join the BRDC's Rising Stars scheme. Seven have had single-seater success with GB3 victors Tom Lebbon and Max Esterson being joined by British Formula 4 race winners Louis Sharp, Aiden Neate and Joseph Loake, German F4 title contender Taylor Barnard and GB4 runner-up Jarrod Waberski. From sportscars, World Endurance racer Casper Stevenson, Ginetta Junior champion Josh Rowledge, Porsche Sprint Challenge title winner Harry Foster and British GT driver Tom Edgar are also new.

#### **FAIRCLOUGH TO JHR IN F4**

ROKiT Racing Star winner Deagen Fairclough has been confirmed as driving for JHR Developments in British Formula 4 this year. The former Fiesta Junior racer impressed in the new simulator-based shootout competition last May and will now get the chance to make his single-seater debut.

#### **SHORT BEC QUALIFYING**

The British Endurance
Championship's new qualifying
format received a thumbs up from
competitors at Silverstone. Each
race grid is now determined by
a single 10-minute session for Am
drivers immediately following free
practice. "It's very similar to what's
been happening abroad so it should
be good to teach Ams to maximise
a new-tyre run," said 2022 champion
Tom Jackson, who has switched to
a Breakell Racing-run Mercedes-AMG
GT4 alongside newcomer Ameerh
Naran for his title defence.

#### HAND GRABS FERRARI DRIVE

Charlie Hand, who won the Renault Clio class within last year's Britcar Trophy, has graduated to a British Endurance campaign. The 2021 Junior Saloon champion made his GT debut at Silverstone last weekend alongside Chris Goddard and Charlie Hollings in the RNR Ferrari 458 Challenge (below). The trio won their class and were fourth overall.



#### **Ex-IndyCar** driver Gonzalez wins on return

#### **BRITCAR PROTOTYPE CUP**

Former IndyCar racer and Formula 1 test driver Rodolfo Gonzalez made a winning return to competition, after a long layoff, in the Britcar Prototype Cup last weekend.

Gonzalez won the British F<sub>3</sub> National class title with T-Sport in 2006, then raced in GP2 and tested for the Lotus/Caterham and Marussia F1 teams before a six-race IndyCar spell for Dale Coyne Racing in 2015. Subsequent health issues then sidelined the British-educated Venezuelan.

"I stopped because, for some time, I became slightly ill," said the 36-year-old, who contributes to ESPN Argentina's F1 coverage. "I had a growing tumour in my middle ear and I felt I was losing a lot of balance. We had a deal to go IndyCar racing the year after with Dale; unfortunately, I wasn't able to be medically fit so I had to stop. I went for a massive operation and then spent a year recovering from that. And, once you fall off the radar, it was very tough to come back. I lost all my sponsorship and



then we had the bad crisis in Venezuela, so it just went downhill from there.

"I fell out of love with racing for a while but I think the more I tried to stay away, the more I wanted to come back. I was inspired by seeing [Fernando] Alonso come back to racing after a while off. [Robert] Kubica was a big inspiration, to see him after so long come back to racing. So I thought, 'These guys are able to do it; why shouldn't I? With enough training, perhaps I can do it."

Having sampled the Praga R1 during last November's MotorsportDays LIVE event, Gonzalez agreed to return in an Idola Motorsport-prepared car. He qualified

second at Silverstone and, despite briefly slipping to third in wet conditions, forced a mistake from Charles Hall to win the opening sprint race. The car he shared with Ruben Stanislaus, who featured in the recent BBC documentary Born to Race, suffered an electrical issue before his stint in the longer 50-minute contest.

"You don't forget it!" smiled Gonzalez. "It comes back. It's just in medium-to-high speed corners, you think, 'Ah, could have gone faster'. I'd love to do the full season. I love the UK - it's like being home for me, home away from home."

**MARK PAULSON** 

#### Morgan victor Kiss to enter Historic FF1600



#### **HISTORICS**

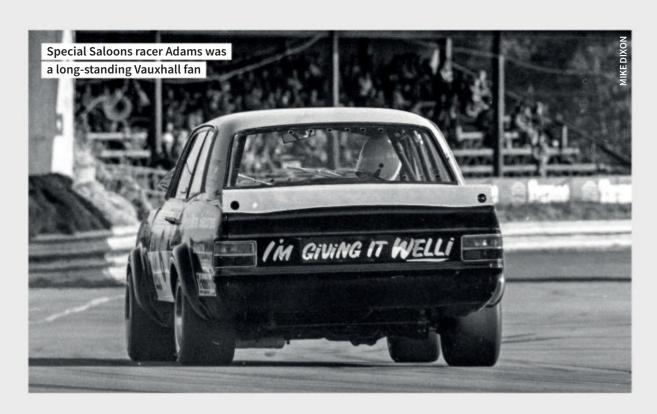
Morgan Motor Company engineer Tony Kiss, overjoyed at winning last Sunday's second round of the Morgan Challenge at Snetterton in a CX +4, will dovetail further events with Historic Formula Ford outings this season.

Kiss, who worked for Aston Martin for 15 years before joining Morgan in January, defied his lack of previous racing experience amounting to a couple of Toyota MR2 races more than a decade ago - to take two podiums.

He is no stranger to FF1600, however, having won last year's Hillclimb and Sprint Association title in a Van Diemen RF85, which he rebuilt alongside an RF87 prior to use. Kiss has acquired a Lola T202 from former Aston colleague Chris Porritt for his singleseater racing adventure.

**MARCUS PYE** 





#### **Dick Adams 1944-2023**

**OBITUARY** 

Another link with Special Saloons racing is gone with the death of Dick Adams, who lost his long battle with cancer over the weekend. He was 78.

The Norfolk man, who ran Bacon Engineering through his racing era, then Watton Hire prior to his retirement, was an ardent Vauxhall fan. His early successes came locally at Snetterton in the mid-1970s, driving an HB Viva GT, previously one of the Allam Motor Services pair raced by young future British Saloon Car star Jeff Allam and John Elliott.

"With his background, Dick's cars

were always put together very nicely," said long-time friend Trevor Griffiths of TJ Motorsport, who in later years invited him to co-drive his Firenza ModSaloon, a kindness reciprocated with an outing in the Chevette Adams built.

Adams was among the pioneers of Britain's first round-the-clock race, the 1980 Willhire 24 Hours at Snetterton, in a Triumph TR7. In the inaugural race, Dick, Graham Bolton, Duncan Kirk, Kerry Nash, Jim Wheals and Dave Wilson co-drove the gallant car but retired. It returned in subsequent seasons but results eluded the amateur equipe.

**MARCUS PYE** 

#### Subaru stars on Isle of Wight sprint

**SPRINT** 

Damien Bradley took a clear victory in the second running of the Sandown Sprint, held on closed roads on the Isle of Wight seafront last weekend.

Bradley, who narrowly missed out in 2022 to Will Nicholls, took his Time Attack and hillclimb-spec 800bhp Subaru Legacy (below) to victory. He

set a new course record of 33.69 seconds on Saturday on the 700-metre course, which featured a couple of chicanes, a run around a roundabout and a shoot up Culver Parade. A damp Sunday meant each run was vital to success as the best time from each day was added to get the result. Again, Bradley was quickest, ending

up with a 2.16s win when



times were combined.

The Isle of Wight Car Club and Solent-organised event attracted 86 entries and took place in front of thousands of spectators. Clive Stangle also impressed in his productionbased Mitsubishi Evo 5, beating Nicholls – who again campaigned his Ford Fiesta R5 rally car - to second.

A vast range of machinery took part from Radical sportscars to Audi R8 and Nissan GTR supercars to lightly modified road cars and even a 1938 Austin 7 Special. Organisers are already planning ways to further improve the event for 2024.

**JOSHUA BARRETT** 

#### IN THE HEADLINES

#### **SOWTER'S 406 THWARTED**

Colin Sowter's debut in the ex-Paul Radisich Peugeot 406 Super Touring car, planned for Silverstone last weekend, was thwarted by mechanical dramas. The crew were completing repairs after the car blew a head gasket in Brands Hatch testing when one of the cylinder head bolts ripped out.

#### SHANLY'S HISTORIC MOVE

Former British Formula 3 driver Stephen Shanly has not regularly raced since 2005 but, after a couple of one-off outings last year, was back in action last weekend in Classic K at Snetterton. Shanly won National Supersports titles in 2003 and 2004 in a Chiron before moving to the Porsche Carrera Cup GB. Now he is back racing in the ex-Cliff Gray 26R-spec Lotus Elan. He ran a strong second before its oil cooler split.

#### PRICE'S BHRC VICTORY

Joe Price and Chris Brooks emerged on top of a quality field on Saturday's Rally North Wales, the second British Historic Rally Championship round. Having only completed about five competitive miles in the previous four years, the Ludlow driver was straight into the mix in his Ford Escort Mk2 and edged the similar car of Roger Chilman by just three seconds after a ferocious day of competition. Nick Elliott completed the historic podium in his Fiat 131.

#### CLASSIC BTRDA RX ACTION

With its largest entry for several years, the BTRDA Clubmans Rallycross season began at Blyton Park last weekend. Some of the main interest was the duel between John Cross's Lancia Stratos replica and Lee Wood's Ford Escort (below), in a John Welch livery. Cross won the first Classic heat but, having retired from the second, he failed to start heat three. Wood won both, but Cross had the upper hand in the final until Wood surged ahead exiting the loose on lap three of five, to take the spoils.





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### British GT's Super Touring moment

There are some star international drivers among the eight factory racers in this year's British GT field. Has the series ever been better?

JAMES NEWBOLD

here are numerous reasons for Super Touring being upheld over 20 years on as the British Touring Car Championship's zenith. Close racing between cars that looked and sounded different, while bearing a similarity with those you might find in the supermarket car park, is surely a factor. But another is the big name overseas drivers who brought real prestige. For a few short years, the BTCC amounted to an international calibre national series as tin-top greats Roberto Ravaglia, Frank Biela and Laurent Aiello were among those arriving to test themselves against the best these shores had to offer.

The announcement that Raffaele Marciello would become the eighth factory driver on the British GT grid this year makes me wonder whether this is the championship's own Super Touring moment. Marciello, who joins John Ferguson at RAM Racing, will go up against fellow Mercedes ace Jules Gounon. He won the Spa 24 Hours and GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup with Marciello last year, and links up once more with defending British GT champion Ian Loggie as the pair switch from RAM to 2 Seas Motorsport. German McLaren gun Marvin Kirchhofer also returns alongside Alexander West at Garage 59 after finishing second on their sole British GT outing last year at Silverstone.

Add them to the host of home-grown factory talents racing McLaren, Lamborghini, Aston Martin and BMW machinery

## "It's phenomenally tough. It's probably the most competitive season I've seen in total"

and it's little wonder that four-time series champion Jonny Adam — the Aston works ace contesting five meetings with James Cottingham in a 2 Seas Merc — says "the championship has become really serious now".

Of course, there have been factory guns in British GT before—take 2018 when Aston fielded Nicki Thiim, Marco Sorensen and Maxime Martin alongside Adam and Darren Turner. And with Yelmer Buurman, who edged Marciello to win that year's Blancpain GT Endurance title, also on the grid it wouldn't be accurate to say the field has a more international flavour now than ever either.

But, whereas back then the influx could be largely explained by a British brand that was keen to support customers of its venerable V12 Vantage GT3 in its final season on home soil, now the spread is more even across the manufacturers — a point Adam acknowledges.

"I do think it helps the championship when you've got international drivers coming over and they all love it because the circuits are so unique in the UK," he says.

For Gounon, this is a core part of the appeal. In choosing his programme with Mercedes customer racing boss Stefan Wendl, he prioritised a British GT return on "those tracks that I love" alongside a GTWCE title defence and IMSA SportsCar Championship GTD Pro campaign. "When Ian asked me if I wanted to do British GT again it was not even a question, it was an absolute pleasure," Gounon says. "I enjoy so much to be on those tracks and in the car with him."

The factory aces are only the tip of the iceberg, with quality in abundance on the 18-car GT3 grid (the healthiest since 2014) including five other previous race winners, a past GT4 champion and European Le Mans Series title winner. As Adam Carroll showed last year with his stout defence against Gounon at Oulton Park, not being in the car every week isn't always a barrier to success, so don't go thinking the factory drivers will have it all their own way.

"The number of factory drivers is massively impressive but there's a number of guys as well who aren't a full factory driver and are still bloody good," says works McLaren racer Rob Bell, who will share an Optimum-run machine with Mark Radcliffe. "Yes, factory drivers are pretty stacked, but the rest of them are pretty handy."

Is British GT better than ever? Bell says the presence of Nick Tandy, Richard Westbrook and Allan Simonsen on the grid a decade ago shows "there's always been good guys in it" but believes "there's just more volume of quality drivers" now.

"It's phenomenally tough and I don't remember seeing quite so many Pros who are at a top, top line doing it," reckons Bell. "I'd say it's probably the most competitive season I've seen in total."

But don't forget that in Pro-Am racing both drivers share the responsibility of getting to the finish first. With the Pros usually evenly matched, the biggest difference as ever will be found in those who can extract potential from their amateur co-drivers. This emphasis has been a key factor in Adam's unparalleled success down the years, and he's not about to change his approach now. "It works so well in British GT because the Am has to drive 62 minutes in a two-hour race and it's a combined qualifying in a lot of places," he says.

One exception is the two Oulton sprints, where grids are set by the Am and Pro respectively. So, when Easter weekend arrives, all eyes will be on the battle for the race-two pole — perhaps the most eagerly anticipated quali session in years between some of the finest GT3 drivers in the world giving it the beans.

A Super Touring Festival at Brands Hatch in July is targeting some of the biggest names of yesteryear, but UK-based spectators will be treated to the modern-day equivalent six times this season. Don't miss it.



#### **SILVERSTONE BARC** 25-26 MARCH

The British Endurance Championship opened on the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit last weekend with a win on his GT3 debut for Claude Bovet, paired with Pro partner David McDonald in Blackthorn's Mercedes-AMG.

The three-hour contest had a lower than anticipated entry and was a two-horse race for overall honours, but an almost race-long tussle, with momentum swinging between the eventual winners and Audi R8 pairing Peter Erceg and Marcus Clutton, made it

an absorbing contest. Am drivers Erceg and Bovet were separated by just 0.05 seconds in the 10-minute quickfire qualifying session on a drying track. Bovet moved ahead on the second lap and proceeded to eke out a small advantage only for New Zealander Erceg, also graduating to GT3 machinery for the first time, to reel the Swiss back in. Erceg pounced among traffic into Maggotts after a quarter of the race but could not shake off Bovet ahead of the first round of pitstops.

There the leaders' strategies diverged, McDonald stepping in for Bovet while Erceg remained at the wheel until his second stop on half-distance. McDonald's pace, combined with a longer first stop for the Audi, allowed the Mercedes to build its advantage. But, after relieving Erceg, Clutton responded. With the Mercedes delayed by a drivethrough penalty for track-limits offences, Clutton closed in and overtook in the Loop with a quarter of the race remaining.

But a fractionally short second stop incurred Erceg and Clutton a stop/go penalty. That effectively ended their chances and, when Clutton did not stop for the full 5s, he was slapped with another penalty that made sure. "It's my mistake there's no one else to blame," admitted a deflated Clutton, whose Enduro Motorsport squad also runs the car. "It was an incredible race," beamed Bovet. "I feel so confident in that car - I love it."

Four laps in arrears, the Aston Martin Vulcan of Gleb Stepanovs and Stephen Tomkins completed the podium after battling fuel, oil and water-pressure woes.

A dramatic first Britcar Trophy race could have been won by at least four cars. Ultimately it was a slightly bemused Axel van Nederveen who took the honours in his Datum Motorsport Ginetta G56 GTA. Ian Astley's SVG Motorsport version led the early stages before Bryan Bransom (BMW M<sub>3</sub> E<sub>4</sub>6) outbraked him into Stowe and pulled away. But Bransom relayed Jasver Sapra five minutes after the new, shorter pit window had closed, earning a corresponding









stop/go, which ended their hopes. Astley, co-driven by Neil Wallace, suffered a spin after contact with Britcar debutante Jade Edwards, whose Ginetta lost second thanks to co-driver Mike West's late rotation.

Meantime, Will Stacey had scythed his Lotus Elise through to a net lead despite starting from the pitlane because the car did not conform to Britcar's technical specification in qualifying. A track-limits drivethrough dropped him back, but he recovered to second by passing Maurizio Sciglio's Ginetta on the last lap and benefiting from West's misadventure.

A charging drive from the back by Sapra and Bransom, unencumbered by success penalties, appeared to have given them a race-two win, only for the BMW to fail a weight check. Van Nederveen again inherited victory, while Stacey, whose Rob Boston Racing team had performed a swift head-gasket change between races, salvaged second again despite losing ground by not pitting immediately under a safety car.

Ten-time champion Stephen Primett began his latest Pre-'83 Touring Car title defence in perfect fashion with a pair of victories in his Ford Escort Mk1. It was by no means easy as Will Davison (BMW E30) and Jonathan Corker (Datson 510) played their parts in thrilling races. Primett and Davison exchanged the lead in a fantastic duel on Saturday, while Corker overcame gearbox issues to dive inside Mark Cholerton (Escort RS2000) for third at Brooklands late on.

The three-way Sunday scrap included Corker — with spare gearbox — passing Davison and Primett in one go at Abbey before Primett eventually bested him. The Pre-'66 section was twice won relatively comfortably by Pete Hallford's Ford Mustang ahead of Alan Greenhalgh (Ford Falcon).

Having lightened his BMW M<sub>3</sub> E<sub>3</sub>6 over the winter, Stuart Waite showed he will be tough to beat in Pre-'93 Touring Cars with a pair of victories. Saturday's success came after pouncing on the sole surviving Super Tourer of Jason Hughes – Nissan twins Richard Wheeler and Anthony Reid had succumbed to a spin and a blown valve – after a safety car in a race hit by a downpour. Waite led home Pre-'03 winner Gary Prebble (Honda Civic) and James Everard (BMW M<sub>3</sub> E<sub>30</sub>), as he did in Sunday's rematch — minus all three Super Tourers - albeit with the minor podium positions reversed as Prebble contended with a misty screen and failed wipers.

Jason West opened his 2023 account with a Classic Thunder brace. West's Sunday win came after lining up Bryan Bransom's similar BMW M3 E46 around the outside of Stowe and completing the pass into the Club chicane. He repelled Bransom's pressure thereafter, as he had done a day

#### **WEEKEND WINNERS**

#### **BRITISH ENDURANCE CHAMPIONSHIP**

Claude Bovet/David McDonald (Mercedes-AMG GT3)

#### **BRITCAR TROPHY**

Races 1 & 2 Axel van Nederveen (Ginetta G56 GTA)

#### PRE-'66 & PRE-'83 TOURING CARS

Races 1 & 2 Stephen Primett (Ford Escort Mk1)

#### SUPER TOURERS/PRE-'93 & PRE-'03 TOURING CARS

Races 1 & 2 Stuart Waite (BMW M3 E36)

#### CLASSIC THUNDER/BOSS/ JAGUAR CHALLENGE

Races 1 & 2 Jason West (BMW M3 E46)

#### **BRITCAR PROTOTYPE CUP**

Race 1 Rodolfo Gonzalez (Praga R1)

Race 2 Shane Kelly (Praga R1, below)

Race 3 Teddy Wilson/Ben Stone (Praga R1)



For full results visit: tsl-timing.com

earlier. Sam Wilson powered Rikki Cann's Aston Martin V8 Vantage to a podium double, while Mike Manning's Ford Sierra RS500 twice took Blue Oval Saloon Series honours. In the Jaguar Challenge, 2021 champion Mike Seabourne piloted Derek Pearce's XJS to a double victory. Debuting his new XK8, Jack Robinson won Sunday's wet race on the road but was penalised for yellow-flag infringements.

A thin field contested the inaugural Britcar Prototype Cup races. Former IndyCar driver Rodolfo Gonzalez took the opener after pressurising Charles Hall into a mistake at Luffield in the wet conditions. Shane Kelly quickly picked his way through to the front of the second sprint race before taking a commanding victory from Hall's team-mate Scott Mittell.

On a drier track, Fun Cup racer Teddy Wilson impressed as he passed Jessica Hawkins and then Hall to lead the 50-minute finale. With his car not required to serve a success penalty at its pitstop, Ben Stone had a 20s lead when he took over from Wilson before motoring to a comfortable win over Hall/Mittell and Will Stowell/Chris Bridle.

**MARK PAULSON** 

#### **Turkington** shows his class with two wins

**SNETTERTON CSCC** 25-26 MARCH

Despite Saturday's howling gale, which blunted speed on the Senna Straight but provided a tail wind on the Bentley Straight, 300 Classic Sports Car Club competitors enjoyed fine racing on Snetterton's 300 circuit. Four-time British Touring Car champion Colin Turkington, racing Mark Smith's Amspeed BMW E<sub>3</sub>6 M<sub>3</sub> Evo for the first time, demonstrated his class by dominating the Slicks Series solo race and relaying Smith to gold in its pitstop sequel.

"It's fun to race with no pressure or expectation," said Turkington, who overcame Will Ashmore (Ferrari F430), Iake Severs (Ginetta G50) and Christian Douglas's Ariel Atom. After Andy Southcott buzzed his Midget's Vauxhall engine, Rod Birley celebrated the 50th anniversary of his first race by taking concurrent Special Saloon honours, having completed rebuilding his BMW's engine at midnight.

The closest finish came in Tin Tops, the screaming Honda Type Rs of Andrew Windmill (Civic Leggera) and Danny Cassar (in Nigel Ainge's Integra) 0.152 seconds apart. Carrying 30s of 'success ballast' at the mandatory stops for his Silverstone victory, Cassar squeezed ahead in tricky conditions, but Windmill's retaliation was immediate. Adam Brown, whose Ford Fiesta ST's gearbox was out after qualifying, and James Wilson (Peugeot 206) chased hard.

Nowhere was sacrosanct as brothers Christian and Jonny Pittard in rasping 2.5-litre Caterhams slugged it out in



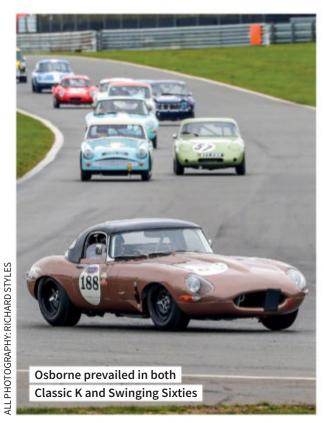
the opening Magnificent Sevens stanza, the race of the Saturday. After breathtaking exchanges, Christian prevailed over Jonny by 0.267s and completed his double when his sibling's supercharged 'JPS' broke. Class H standout James Tubby saw off Richard Carter for third in race one, but rival Jonathan Edwards hopped, skipped and jumped from ninth to second later, amid a frenetic 10-car train in the midfield.

Suffolk's Carl Chambers erased memories of Silverstone, where a broken engine mount had stopped his Pugsport Peugeot 208 GTI, by winning the soggy Turbo Tin Tops race. Clutch master cylinder failure restricted him to three laps in qualifying but, from eighth, he hounded the inspired Andrew Marson (Fiat Abarth Assetto Corse), who rued "a slight mistake" at the 'Searpin'. Chambers whooshed past as Marson –

one of three cousins in the race – exited the pits. Third-placed John Wyatt (Mini Cooper S R56) was catching Marson until he went mowing.

Mark Lee's Ginetta deservedly won the entertaining New Millennium/Open Series finale in which his three closest pursuers were excluded for Code 60 infringements after poleman Dave Griffin spun his BMW E90 M3 at Riches after the start, stalled and eventually got going. Michael Vitulli (E46 M3) and Turkington/ Smith advanced to second and third.

The wind reversed overnight, bringing wet qualifying, but the track dried. Australian Griffin patiently progressed from 11th in a Diet Coke tribute E36 M3 to outrun poleman Tom Mensley's sister car in Modern Classics. Giant-slayer Roger Hamilton (Ginetta G20) was elevated to



#### **WEEKEND WINNERS**

#### **SLICKS SERIES**

(BMW E36 M3 Evo) Race 2 Colin Turkington/

Mark Smith (BMW E36 M3 Evo)

#### **SPECIAL SALOONS & MODSPORTS**

Race 1 Rod Birley (BMW E36 M3)

Race 2 Jack Gadd (Ford Escort RSR)

#### **TIN TOPS/PUMA CUP**

Andrew Windmill (Honda Civic Type R)

#### MAGNIFICENT SEVENS

(Caterham CSR)

#### **TURBO TIN TOPS**

Carl Chambers (Peugeot 208 GTI)

#### **NEW MILLENNIUM/OPEN SERIES**

Mark Lee (Ginetta G55)

#### **MODERN CLASSICS**

Dave Griffin (BMW E36 M3)

#### **SWINGING SIXTIES**

**Group 1** Sam Polley (Mini Marcos) **Group 2** Steve Osborne

#### (Jaguar E-type)

#### **CLASSIC K**

Steve Osborne/Chris Ward (Jaguar E-type)

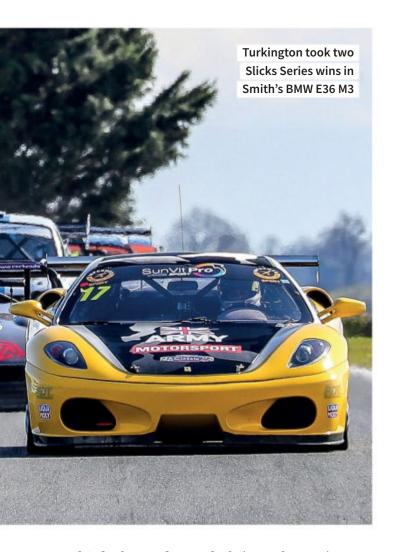
#### **MORGAN CHALLENGE**

Race 1 William Pratt (+4) Race 2 Tony Kiss (CX +4)

#### **FUTURE CLASSICS**

Stephen Scott-Dunwoodie (Ford Sierra RS500)

For full results visit tsl-timing.com



third when Adrian Clark (Porsche 928) was penalised for a pit infringement.

Sam Polley's big Swinging Sixties Group 1 lead was expunged by a Code 60, which brought James Hughes's Sprite back into contention. Hughes wriggled ahead, only to retire at Agostini on the final lap with differential failure, rewarding the Mini Marcos man. Mike Henney/Dominic Mooney (Turner Mk2) just repelled Connor Kay (MG Midget) for second.

Debuting his reliveried ex-Richard Kent Jaguar E-type, Steve Osborne led three-quarters of the Classic K hour imperiously, then left Chris Ward to finish lapping the field. Of five Lotus Elans that squabbled around Harry Wyndham's E-type FHC, only Tim and Mark Cousins's lasted, capitalising when Wyndham spun to annex second. Osborne then aced Swinging Sixties Gp2, beating Jon Wolfe/Martyn Adams (TVR Tuscan) after suspension damage halted Mark Campbell's feisty Triumph TR4.

Poleman Will Pratt hurtled away from Morgan Challenge rivals in the opener pursued by Tony Kiss, Chris Myhill and Louis Ruff. Second qualifier Martin Pratt, whose car broke, took over son Will's for round two and seized the lead twice before it started cutting out. Morgan engineer Kiss was an ecstatic victor, from John Emberson.

Nursing gearbox problems — "It wouldn't have lasted another lap" — Stephen Scott-Dunwoodie was relieved to see the Future Classics flag in his Sierra RS500. Richard Harman (Porsche 944 Turbo) negated his 20s Silverstone imposition to finish second, ahead of James Neal/Neil Harvey's 993, which survived a collision at Murrays in which Matthew Ellis's ballistically quick Talbot Sunbeam Lotus suffered a puncture. MARCUS PYE



**CLOSE FIGHT FOR THIRD** Highlight of the Special Saloon & Modsports contests was the stirring battle for third in race two. Father and son Colin and David Claxton – in turbocharged Ford Escort and curious Triumph Dolomite Sprint *kurzheck* respectively – and club debutant Peter Kennerley in his two-litre Ford Zetec-engined Marcos GT had a ball. The Claxtons overtook each other audaciously at Turn 3 on successive laps in staving off Kennerley (right), who spun at Riches while splitting them.



**VOLVO MIGHTY MOOSE** Volvo's C30 is an unusual hybrid. A Ford Focus under the skin, its floorpan, front-wheel-drive powertrain and suspension are all Blue Oval. Adrian Matthews built his from an SE Lux model to replace the Puma crashed at Brands Hatch in 2019, and its crisp-sounding two-litre, four-cylinder 250bhp Duratec engine always draws attention. "At 1200kg, weight is its downfall," he said. "It could do with the 2.5-litre five-cylinder turbo option, but I race 'The Moose' for fun."



SHADES OF PETTY Sometime CSCC Porsche 944 Turbo racer Alex Elbrow debuted his 1966 Plymouth Belvedere GTX, inspired by NASCAR king Richard Petty's 1967 car. Powered by an 8.3-litre Chrysler V8, it was used by Elbrow on trackdays before he decided to end a decade's sabbatical. It was in its element on the straights at Snetterton, but ponderous roadholding made cornering tricky. After throwing a water pump belt in qualifying, it retired from the Swinging Sixties Group 2 race.

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# Large FVee entry cranks up the excitement

#### KIRKISTOWN 500MRCI 25 MARCH

In many ways, it looked as though the opening Kirkistown event of 2023 picked up where 2022 left off. Plenty of familiar names headed the timesheets after qualifying, and a lot of them stayed ahead through the cycle of races that followed.

But it wasn't quite as simple as that, for very few of the fancied names had it easy, and the two single-seater classes, Formula Ford 1600 and Formula Vee, produced some stunning racing that reduced the commentators to a state of near-hysteria before chequered flags ended the fun.

The Vees produced the largest grids of the day, and excitement all the way. In the first race for Class B and C runners, things didn't run entirely to plan, with red flags flying on the 11th lap when a spinner at the Hairpin ended up stranded in a dangerous place. This was unfortunate for teenager Ronan Doherty, who fought his way through from 11th, after an early incident, to cross the line first, only to find himself demoted to second behind Sean Newsome when the result was declared after lap 10. But it was still a Max Verstappen-esque performance, especially for a driver enjoying his first-ever race!

The Class A runners entered the fray for race two and it turned into an eight-car battle that lasted for most of the distance. Not surprisingly, Anthony Cross, who is no stranger to winning, was ahead when the flag fell, followed home by Jack Byrne, Lee Newsome and Gavin Buckley. Fifth and best of the B and C runners was Doherty, who saw off the rest of the 25-strong field to complete a good day.

By contrast, FF1600 had a small field – only eight cars – but nonetheless the



action was intense. Current Kirkistown champion David McCullough and his white Van Diemen RF01 occupied his usual pole position twice, with Dave Parks's Ray alongside both times. The pair finished the opener two seconds apart, with Historic F2 star Darwin Smith (RF90) third, just, from the younger Van Diemen of Jordan Kelly.

It was McCullough and Parks leading the way again in race two, with Rob Parks slotting into third place after fighting through a pack comprising Smith, Alan Davidson, Kelly and Donal Downey, but not before they had spent much of the race circulating side by side.

The new-for-2023 Mini Cooper category provided plenty of excitement too, the mostly novice field producing some very grown-up racing. Race one fell to Jack Conachy from Darren Gilmore and Conachy's dad Noel, while race two went to Kian O'Brien, with Conachy Jr in the runner-up spot from Shane Henry. But with the top six covered by just 10 seconds in the first encounter and four in the second, there was plenty to watch.

Elsewhere, there were back-to-back victories for Steven Larkham's Radical

in Roadsports and Graham Moore in the concurrent NI Sevens, while Cameron Fenton and Jack Finlay shared the Global Lights spoils. Gavin Stanfield's Subaru in Saloons and Robert Kennedy among the Mazda MX-5 brigade also scored doubles, as did Michael Graham in a brace of small, but robust, Fiesta encounters.

**RICHARD YOUNG** 

#### **WEEKEND WINNERS**

#### **FORMULA VEE**

Race 1 Sean Newsome (Sheane FV01)
Race 2 Anthony Cross (Sheane FV94)

#### **FORMULA FORD 1600**

Races 1 & 2 David McCullough (Van Diemen RF01)

#### MINI COOPERS

Race 1 Jack Conachy Race 2 Kian O'Brien

#### ROADSPORTS/NI SEVENS/GLOBAL LIGHTS

Races 1 & 2 Steven Larkham (Radical PR06)

#### SALOONS/GTs

Races 1 & 2 Gavin Stanfield (Subaru Impreza, below)

#### MAZDA MX-5s/FIESTA ZETECS

Races 1 & 2 Robert Kennedy (MX-5)



For full results visit: speedhive.mylaps.com





owadays, the notion seems difficult to imagine.

The idea of Formula 1 stars Lando Norris or George
Russell taking part in a British Endurance sportscar
race at Snetterton, while champion Lewis Hamilton
competes in a single-seater contest on the support
bill, seems somewhat far-fetched — not least because of the everexpanding F1 schedule. But, in decades gone by and during a time
when leading drivers were free to be far more versatile, an equivalent
situation was commonplace. And the Autosport 3 Hours race that
was originally held at the Norfolk circuit in the 1950s and 1960s
is the perfect example of this.

As a driver on the cusp of breaking into F1, Jim Clark won the third edition of the race in 1959 at the wheel of a Lotus Elite and was victorious again four years later, this time as an F1 title contender.

After being created in 1957 as a grand finale to Autosport's sportscar championship, the 3 Hours also brought night racing back to Britain, following the final Goodwood Nine Hours two years earlier. That initial race — administered by the Snetterton Motor Racing Club — featured a Le Mans-style start and was won by successful GT driver Ken Rudd at the wheel of an AC Ace, but the event quickly grew from there.

In 1959, a non-championship F1 race was added to the undercard and that year's world champion Jack Brabham was in the thick of the action. Fellow title winner Graham Hill was among those tackling some of the subsequent tin-top support races over the years, while Brabham was the touring car race winner in a Ford Galaxie in 1963.

Yet, despite the prospect of such international stars doing battle

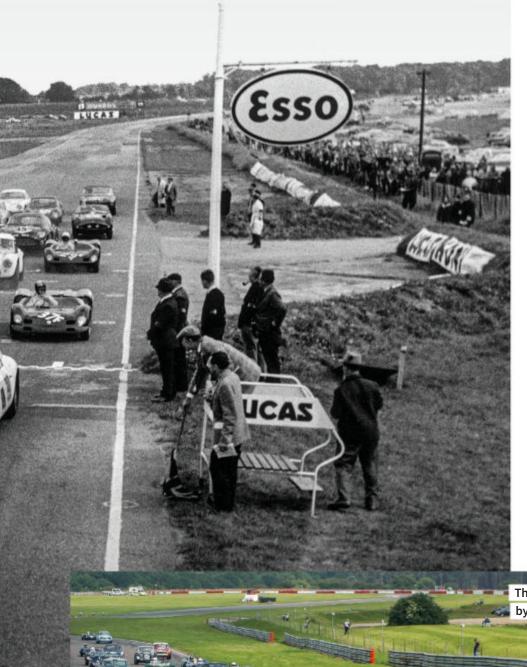


CHARD STYLES

with amateur club racers, that year's event only attracted a limited crowd and the 1964 instalment, won by inaugural British Saloon Car champion Jack Sears in an AC Cobra, proved to be the last period race.

But the history lives on. The Historic Sports Car Club first revived the 3 Hours in 2007 and it continued to run until 2015, and the club is now bringing it back for a second time this year. The contest's glorious past is very much at the centre of the HSCC's plans for the event, including the creation of a replica of the original cup so that more drivers can join the likes of Clark in having their name on the winners' list.

"We're a historic racing club, we're racing historic cars and there's historical significance to this race, so the history is very important to us," explains HSCC CEO Andy Dee-Crowne. "The cup is as much of a replica of the original as we can get, and all of that nostalgia is important. I think the opportunity to have your name on a cup

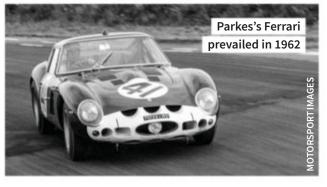




#### "THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE YOUR NAME ON A CUP ALONGSIDE NAMES LIKE JIM CLARK IS A FANTASTIC DRAW"









PREV	/IOUS WINNERS	
YEAR	DRIVER(S)	CAR
1957	Ken Rudd	AC Ace
1958	John Lawry	Lotus Elite
1959	Jim Clark	Lotus Elite
1960	Dickie Stoop	Porsche 356B
1961	Mike Salmon	Jaguar D-type
1962	Mike Parkes	Ferrari 250 GTO
1963	Jim Clark	Lotus 23B
1964	Jack Sears	AC Cobra
2007	Simon Hadfield/Michael Schryve	r Chevron B6
2008	Simon Hadfield/Michael Schryve	r Chevron B6
2009	James & Jeremy Cottingham	Chevron B8
2010	Gareth Burnett/Alex Ames	Chevron B8
2011	Nick Fleming/Luke Stevens	Chevron B8
2012	Nick Fleming	Chevron B8
2013	Nick Fleming	Chevron B8
2014	Chris Ward/Alex Buncombe	Jaguar E-type
2015	Martin O'Connell	Jaguar E-type

alongside names like Jim Clark is a fantastic draw."

After the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, Dee-Crowne believes that now is the right moment to return the historic race to the schedule. "It's always been my ambition and intention to bring an endurance race back to the HSCC and it made sense to resurrect this race," he says. "Endurance racing is a leveller — it does give people the opportunity to get a good placing within the class structure. Now seems like the appropriate time to bring it back."

The 2023 edition is set to return to the roots of the Autosport 3 Hours, with the focus due to be on pre-1966 GT cars, rather than the slightly later sports-racers that were at the front of many of the races when it was first revived. The 23 April race – on Snetterton's 200 layout, which is the closest configuration to what was originally used in the period races and is also less demanding on the historic machines -

has already attracted a diverse entry with almost a month to go.

Lotus Elans are set to be joined by Porsche 911s, while TVR, Morgan, Austin-Healey, Marcos and even Gilbern are among the other manufacturers set to be represented on the grid. There is also due to be a strong MGB presence, with eight of the cars already signed up in the marque's 100th anniversary year, and the HSCC will award a special trophy to the highest-placed MGB in the final result - "We wanted to recognise the importance of the MGB," says Dee-Crowne.

Inclusivity is very much the name of the game, with low entry fees set and competitors from outside the usual HSCC fold encouraged to take part and embrace the spirit of the one-off fun contest early in the season. There may not be the current F1 stars on the grid anymore, but there is the chance for others to follow in their footsteps and write the latest chapter in the Autosport 3 Hours' long history.

# STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

There may be plenty of places to race a Caterham, but the continual innovation from the 7 Race Series is helping it attract the masses

STEPHEN LICKORISH

here can be no disputing the popularity of Caterhams among club racers. Every year, hundreds of drivers compete up and down the country in various forms of the humble Seven. There is a plethora of series dedicated to Caterham machines, and even more multi-marque categories in which fans of these cars can race. Yet, despite that abundance of well-established options, there was still space in the market for one more.

Back in 2017, successful Caterham team McMillan Motorsport joined forces with MotorSport Vision Racing to develop its own version of the theme: the 7 Race Series. This proved tremendously popular from the off, attracting 38 entries for its Brands Hatch event in that inaugural year, and it has continually grown since, last year averaging a combined 57 cars across its two grids.

Such success for the 7 Race Series is no coincidence and there are several reasons why it has proven a hit. "One is everybody abiding by the technical regulations, we are unbelievably hot on that," says series manager Sean Bicknell. "Andy McMillan is a phenomenal engineer — McMillan Motorsport rebuild the diffs, rebuild the gearboxes, the engines, so that fundamental understanding of a legal car and a non-legal car [is there].

"Also, drivers don't want to go and play bumper cars. It's about driving standards and we're really hot on that from a number of angles. We actually don't let the teams run their own hospitality. Because what we think is, if you're going to sit down in the morning next to a guy you've not met before and have a bacon sandwich, you're less likely to have him off at the first bend."

That approach is proving popular with drivers. Gary Smith claimed the 1600 championship last year, having previously competed in several other Caterham-based series, and believes a good atmosphere off-track is important. "You pay a lot of money to go racing and you want to do it with people you get along with," he says. "If you go to a different grid, everybody will go back to their particular vehicle or hotels, whereas we generally try to stay in the same hotel. We'll be around in the evening and have a meal together.

"None of us are going to be in Formula 1 or be paid drivers, let's be honest. We're paying to go racing at the weekend, so you'd best enjoy it — otherwise, what are you doing it for?"



And the 7 Race Series drivers get to enjoy their competition at some of the best circuits in the UK and Europe. "Last year we went to Monza, Estoril and Spa and the GP circuits in the UK, so we do Brands GP rather than Brands Indy," continues Smith. "When we were at Brands, Valentino Rossi was racing [in the GT World Challenge Europe that the 7 Race Series was supporting]. There were so many spectators, there were 25,000–30,000 people, and we were racing in front of them! I managed to get a double win that weekend and those are ones I'll watch on YouTube forever! You look at the crowds, everybody's applauding and they're loving the racing. It's a bucket-list experience."

In addition to the premier UK venues, European trips have long formed part of the series' schedule. Valencia, Jerez and Estoril are on this year's itinerary after the main championship season, which begins at Donington Park next month, has concluded. McMillan has the ability to transport significant numbers of Caterhams across the continent and can also handle the extensive post-Brexit paperwork,





### "LOOK AT THE CROWDS, EVERYBODY'S APPLAUDING AND LOVING THE RACING. IT'S A BUCKET-LIST EXPERIENCE"

thereby providing competitors with a hassle-free experience. "All the guys jump on a cheap flight — we've taken all the cars, all the spare wheels, everything down there and it just makes it more cost-effective and more fun," says Bicknell.

With it being Caterham competition, the racing is also incredibly close. Smith says the huge grids mean there is always someone for each driver to race against, and he picks out last year's Snetterton contests—when he was part of a trio separated by less than a second across the three races combined — as particular favourites. But organisers are conscious of keeping those not involved in the fight at the front engaged, and have therefore introduced the 420R Sportsman championship to give inexperienced drivers in the midfield something to fight for. Similarly, the Chapman Trophy has been created for the top scoring driver aged over 55 on each weekend. A number of enquiries have also led to the formation of a bespoke 270R championship, rather than the catch-all 1600 contest that was dominated by 310R machines.

Further innovations include the series trying to do its bit for the planet, with Smith's Optimising IT firm helping offset the carbon produced from the use of fuel, tyres and brakes across the season. And organisers have even gone a step further than most club categories and are offering prizes for the champions. The 420R and 310R title winners will receive a day's testing in a Porsche Carrera Cup GB machine, while



the 420R Sportsman and 270R champions will get to sample a Porsche Sprint Challenge Cayman, all courtesy of Porsche and Caterham squad Team Parker Racing.

Those prizes are just one example of how the 7 Race Series is continuing to develop and is not resting on its laurels. "The team of guys we've got at McMillan, we sit around and it's like, 'You know what, let's give it a go, let's give it a try," Bicknell concludes. "And we're not scared of doing that. If we do something and it doesn't work, fair enough, you don't know if you don't try." The entry numbers do not lie and it's clear that, so far, this approach is paying off as the series continues to grow."



### SHEERE

#### BT SPORT DOCUMENTARY SHEENE

Strikes. Rampant inflation. Social unrest. An energy crisis. A feeling that the end is nigh. You might well be forgiven for thinking we're about to review the *ITV Evening News*. Actually, we're visiting 1970s Britain, the backdrop for BT Sport's documentary on motorcycle legend Barry Sheene. Premiering just a few hours after a season-opener that featured not one Briton in the top class, *Sheene* is a stark reminder that this country once had a world champion on two wheels who achieved mainstream fame. You just have to go back a few decades to find him.

The troubles of the 1970s are central to a narrative voiced by actor Philip Glenister (he of *Life on Mars* fame), who was a teenager when Sheene reached the peak of his powers. The documentary hangs its hat

on the thesis that society pines for heroes in dark times. Maybe even a particular kind of hero. People like James Hunt, for example.

Now, with the late Hunt having had a second surge of fame thanks to *Rush* and other efforts, it's the turn of his two-wheeled contemporary, who also died tragically young, to get a posthumous wave of public recognition. Let's not forget that Sheene took his first 500cc world title in the same year as Hunt's widely documented triumph over Niki Lauda: 1976.

Motorsport, then, was dishing up a healthy diet of good news at a time when it was in short supply. And Britain's two world champions were perfectly cast for popularity: they lived most days as if they were their last. That Sheene had a hole drilled in his helmet so he could smoke on the starting grid tells you they were cut from the same cloth.

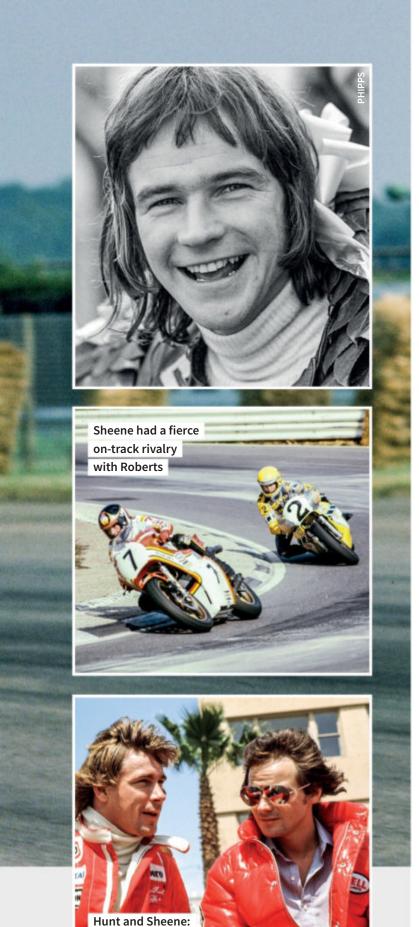
That said, Sheene didn't speak the same language as posh boy Hunt. For those of us too young to remember Barry, hearing his thick London accent adds to the fun of getting to know him through the film's off-track footage, shot everywhere from paddocks to talk-show armchairs.

Building the protagonist's personality

takes priority over detail about races and results. We learn that the confident Sheene would probably have thrived in the social media age: he *wanted* to get famous — to be as recognised as that Donald Duck on his helmet. And he knew how to create and exploit his brand. He was also one of the first in European motorsport to associate strongly with a race number: 7.

While Sheene emerges as a fun-loving, 40-a-day go-getter, so too does an interesting point of difference between cars and bikes — back then at least. Hunt was among the last of the F1 playboys, and something of a feather-ruffler as such. Motorcyclists, we learn, had such a scary reputation that Sheene was regarded as a positive, mainstreaming influence. Hells Angels didn't get invited on talk shows, after all!

Sheene ruled the world in 1976 and 1977, but then came a challenger: Kenny Roberts. There are echoes of Hunt's rivalry with Lauda here, but the American never produced so captivating a bit of television as Sheene's two-fingered gesture to Roberts in their famous battle at Silverstone in 1979. This moment, euphemistically described as a 'wave' by Murray Walker, is a highlight



of the ample track footage.

world champs in 1976

However, it does jar the trained eye when the story of the 1978 title showdown at the Nurburgring appears to be largely illustrated with clips from elsewhere — including Hockenheim, where the German GP was only held in 1977 and 1979...

There's also some remarkable footage around Sheene's accident at Daytona in 1975, including an amusing hospital interview. But given the time the film spends on Sheene's reluctance to race at the Tourist Trophy on safety grounds, it would have been good to understand what he was doing in a non-championship race on a frightening speedway.

The conclusion — including Sheene's move to Australia and his loss to cancer — does come across as rushed. But sometimes you run out of space at the end: this review is no different! Rest assured, though, *Sheene* is worth 55 minutes of your time. Watch it instead of the evening news, perhaps...

RICHARD ASHER

#### WHAT'S ON

#### INTERNATIONAL MOTORSPORT

#### **Australian Grand Prix**

Formula 1 World Championship Round 3/23 2 April

Melbourne, Australia

TV Live

Sky Sports F1, Sun 0555

**W** Highlights

Sky Sports F1, Sun 1930 Channel 4, Sun 1230

#### Formula 2

**Round 3/14** 

1-2 April

Melbourne, Australia

Live Sky Sports F1, Sat 0415, Sun 0230

#### Formula 3

Round 2/10

1-2 April

Melbourne, Australia

Live Sky Sports F1, Sat 0040, Sun 0000

#### **Australian Supercars**

**Round 2/12** 

30 March-2 April

Melbourne, Australia

#### **IndyCar Series**

**Round 2/17** 

2 April

Texas Motor Speedway, USA

**Live** Sky Sports F1, Sun 1700

#### **NASCAR Cup**

**Round 7/36** 

2 April

Richmond, USA

Live Viaplay, Sun 2000



#### **NASCAR Xfinity Series**

**Round 7/33** 

1 April

Richmond, USA

#### **NASCAR Truck Series**

**Round 5/23** 

1 April

Texas Motor Speedway, USA

#### NLS

Round 2/8

1 April

Nurburgring, Germany

Livestream on

Motorsport.tv, Sat 0915

#### **Brazilian Stock Cars**

Round 1/12

2 April

Goiania, Brazil

Livestream on

Motorsport.tv, Sun 1430

#### **MotoGP**

Round 2/21 1-2 April Rio Hondo, Argentina

Live BT Sport 2,

Sat 1845, Sun 1730

#### **UK MOTORSPORT**

#### **Oulton Park BARC**

1 April

Caterhams: 270R, 310R, Roadsport and Seven UK

**Livestream** via barc.net

#### Donington Park MSVR

1-2 April

Bell Sport Challenge, Boxster Cup, Focus Cup, GT Cup, Porsche Club, Radical Cup UK, United Formula Ford, Z Cars & Production GTIs

#### **Brands Hatch ECR**

1-2 April

BCV8s, Equipe Pre '63/50s, Equipe 70s, Equipe GTS, Equipe Libre, MG Cup, MG Trophy, Midget & Sprite Challenge, Triple M





#### FROM THE ARCHIVE

Sixteenth-place starter Gilles Villeneuve's 1981 Dutch Grand Prix lasted just a matter of seconds when, sandwiched in the mid-pack melee between the Alfa Romeo of Bruno Giacomelli and Riccardo Patrese's Arrows, his Ferrari clipped the back of the Alfa (left), went briefly airborne, then spun down the track, somehow avoiding any further contact, before coming to rest in Zandvoort's Tarzan sand trap. "He's had a lot of trouble in practice absolutely for nothing!" was Murray Walker's summary, on a weekend when Ferrari could seemingly extract neither straightline speed nor adequate handing from the 126CK.



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#### FREDRIK EKBLOM MY FAVOURITE... TRACK



any countries around the globe have a rich motorsport landscape that is little-known beyond their own borders.

Sweden is one such nation, and can boast a glut of hidden gems. Having raced around the world in sportscars, tin-tops and single-seaters, three-time Swedish Touring Car champion Fredrik Ekblom chooses one of his local tracks as his favourite.

The enormous success he enjoyed at Falkenberg is clearly a large part of Ekblom's reason for picking the 1.145-mile track. He won eight times in touring cars between 1999 and 2017 across Super Touring, Super 2000, TTA silhouette and TCR rulesets in BMW, Audi and VW machinery. "It's a very small track, but it's been very good to me," he says.

But there's more to it than sheer stats. With lap times of around 41 seconds in Super Touring and only a shade more than that in the subsequent eras, getting into a rhythm is vitally important. Ekblom says the flow of the circuit "suits me well" and allowed him to use a very specific set-up philosophy that made use of his experience of racing Stateside in Indy Lights.

"There are so many right-handers, you can do the set-up so it's more a little bit like an oval-style," reflects Ekblom, who made three Indycar



starts between 1994 and 1996.

Aside from the slow right-left chicane added in 2004 that opens the lap and is also the most obvious overtaking spot, average speeds are fairly high. Ekblom, who experienced UK circuits when he finished runner-up in the 1991 British Formula 3000 Championship, reckons it is comparable to Thruxton, where keeping up momentum is similarly crucial for lap times.

Ekblom believes that the West Coast Racing 320si E90 he drove to victory in 2008 – a year when BMWs locked out the top four places as a new track surface caused problems for several rivals – was the best-suited machine he ever had at the track. "You just drive on instinct," he adds. "I really liked that."

**JAMES NEWBOLD** 



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